

Three years ago Rex and Jen Bingham* were volunteering in their church's youth ministry. Now they're living abroad and working with one of the most unreached people groups in the world (other than American youth, that is!). Much of their story pivoted on what is known as a "vision trip".

What is a Vision Trip?

A vision trip is the term traditionally given to simply exploring an opportunity. It's intentionally traveling to a particular place in order to explore—in person—the possibility of living and ministering there. Often it serves as an affirmation (or refutation) of God's calling there.

Take a moment to think about transplanting your own family into another neighborhood, city, or country. Wouldn't you want to know what you're getting yourselves into? Surprisingly, some churches, missions organizations, and missionary candidates view vision trips as unnecessary delays. Sometimes vision trips are even treated like a detriment to the nobility of "the missionary call" to sell all and set sail to an unknown land, never to return. "If your faith is big enough," so the sentiment goes, "then just trust God and go."

When I discussed this perspective with Jen Bingham, however, she responded with wit and wisdom: "I mean, would you walk into something blindfolded? Why would you not take advantage of the resources that are available today? Do you not think that [missionaries of old] would have taken advantage of those things?"

The story of her and her husband is one of stretching faith—including their vision trip. After participating in a short-term mission trip to the Middle East with their church, the Bingham's began desiring to take their skills overseas permanently. It felt like a crazy idea, so they decided to be very intentional in exploring it.

As they debriefed the mission trip, a church leader encouraged them to enter the church's sending process. That meant enrolling in their missions training course and having an assessment interview. Based on their assessment, church leaders produced development plans for both Rex and Jen. Near the top of those plans it read simply, "Take a vision trip."

Asking the Right Questions

The next step for the Bingham, then, was to plan their trip. “Our church helped us discern where the Lord was leading,” said Rex. “They spoke into where to go and who to meet with. They also prepared us to ask good questions.” Jen, in fact, still has pages of questions listed in her journal that she asked of the various missionary teams they visited. Some of those questions included:

- What’s the vision?
- Where do you see God at work?
- Where do you stand theologically?
- Who’s your sending church? How are they involved?
- What are the pros and cons of your missions organization?
- What are the biggest blessings of life here? Challenges?
- What do you personally struggle with?
- How much longer are you hoping to be here?
- What are the options for my child’s education?
- What does medical care look like here?
- What needs do you have? Can you give me a job description?
- What do you do for fun?
- What does community look like on this team?
- How close do teammates live to one another?
- What’s a day in the life of a local?
- What’s the first year like?
- How do I learn the language?
- What are your expectations? What do you think of my expectations?

Yet even in light of their preparation for the vision trip, Jen admitted, “It’s not that you have to go on a vision trip to answer every question and have the perfect plan. You still have to step out in faith. You’re going to catch the Lord’s vision, not your own, so you have to listen.”

The Bingham did just that, but not only as they sat in the living rooms of numerous missionary team leaders. What spoke to them most clearly was sharing a meal with a local family. “We didn’t make the decision at the time, but just took it in,” Rex reminisced. Later, as they prayed and processed again with their church leaders, the Bingham kept coming back to the impact of that indigenous experience.

Next, however, they had to get real about what they could and could not handle. Rex explained:

Yes, you have to be open, but also you have to be honest with yourself. What [must be] on the table? What do you have to have? If you hate cold weather, then Russia probably won't be the best fit. If you don't want to homeschool, then don't go out in the jungle. Test it out and see if it's realistic. There's both faith and common sense. Because of God's grace, it's ok if you can't live without air conditioning. God's made you who you are.

After much dialogue and prayer, the Bingham and their church discerned together that the Holy Spirit was indeed leading them to a particular place overseas. It had been a shared journey. At the end of my interview with the Bingham, I expressed my gratitude to them for sharing their insight. They just shrugged their shoulders and said, "We learned all this from our sending church!" It was a reminder of the unique opportunity sending churches have in forming their members through vision trips.

Frequently Asked Questions

When is the right time to take a vision trip?

The timing of a vision trip is important. Going too early may mean that things change before the candidate finally moves there. Going too late may feel pointless (especially if the candidate is already committed to moving there). Generally speaking, a vision trip tends to be most effective when the candidate is within 18 months of their desired launch date. This range seems to provide the right balance of exploration and urgency.

What if you don't know anyone in the place you plan to visit?

Networking is a critical part of an effective vision trip. People who actually live and work in the place usually have more realistic perspectives than the candidates. Plus, candidates should be considering a team to join as much as a place to live. If the candidates don't know anyone there, this is a great opportunity to talk with their prospective missions organization to find out who lives there. The organization may even provide insight into whether or not they would approve someone to live there.

What if the vision trip doesn't go well?

Candidates understandably can be discouraged when a vision trip doesn't bring clarity. However, this is not a failure. Sometimes God uses vision trips to reveal that he is not leading them to a place. Although disappointing, it is a much better outcome than finding that out after having moved there. In light of trips possibly not going well, it is possible that some candidates may take multiple vision trips over time.

How can you best prepare for a vision trip?

The effectiveness of a vision trip depends greatly on good preparation. This means involving the sending church from the very beginning, especially through prayer. Perhaps the church wants candidates to consider only certain places, teams, organizations, and/or strategies. Networking well means connecting with potential missionary teams to join, finding out if they are open to more teammates, and asking when a convenient time would be to visit.

How can the church be involved?

In the very least, the church should be aware and praying for the candidate. Ideally, it would communicate with the candidate during the trip in order to pray specifically, or if possible, even send a fellow church member with the candidate. The church can also speak into the candidate's trip according to its own vision, strategy, and network. It can also be helpful for the church to get to know the candidate's potential team leader, as the church will be entrusting the on-the-ground care of the candidate to that leader.

How long should a vision trip be?

A vision trip seems to be most effective when it is 1-2 weeks long. Less than that may be too rushed. More than that stretches toward the category of mid-term missions, which is a wonderful alternative, but falls outside the parameters of this resource.

What if you have already been to the place you plan to visit?

If a candidate has already spent intentional time in the place she is considering moving to, a vision trip may be unnecessary. However, if it has been a long time since she visited, her spouse has not been to the place, or she has not met the team she might be joining, it's wise to consider a vision trip.

What if you don't have a particular place in mind?

If a candidate doesn't have a particular place in mind, it may be premature to take a vision trip. However, if he is open to going anywhere, he should ask his church and missions organization to recommend places to consider. He may even choose to visit multiple places in a single vision trip.

What do you do on a vision trip?

Besides networking and asking the right questions, a vision trip is the time to try experiencing what the candidate would experience if she already lived there. Think and act like a missionary. Eat, drink, observe, socialize, shop, commute, pray—all with missional intentionality. Employ the basic missionary skills as described in *Tradecraft: For the Church on Mission*: following the

Spirit, mapping, exegeting culture, etc. Then give a portion of each day to prayerfully process what has been experienced.

Can a regular short-term missions trip also serve as a vision trip?

Absolutely. Participants on a short-term missions trip should always be encouraged to consider the possibility of God calling them to mid- or long-term service in that place. That means along the way participants should be prayerful and intentional in their conversations and reflections. Sometimes, however, it is wise for a participant to plan on staying a few extra days after the team has left in order to focus fully on vision for the future. It is likely they will be able to see a more everyday glimpse into missionary life when there is no short-term team present.

*Names changed for security