GUIDE

Should a mission team give its shirts away at the end of the trip?

One shirt given to a partner who served beside the team is a gift. A suitcase of extras handed out on the last day is where the matching shirt plan breaks down.

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Many teams pack extra shirts with a plan to hand them out before flying home. The shirts are new, they carry a verse, and they are already paid for, so giving them away feels like the generous finish to a good week. The goal is right. The method is where the plan breaks down, and knowing why helps a team order the right number of shirts and choose who gets them.

Where does giving shirts away go wrong?

The first problem is the local market. In many of the places mission teams serve, selling clothing is how people earn a living, and free clothing competes with them. A 2005 Oxfam report by Sally Baden and Catherine Barber, *The Impact of the Second-hand Clothing Trade on Developing Countries*, found that imported used clothing likely contributed to the decline of West Africa's industrial textile and clothing sector. The same report found the trade also creates work, in transporting, cleaning, repairing and restyling clothes. Either way, clothing that arrives in a place is never economically neutral.

Governments treat it that way too. According to a July 30, 2018 release from the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, Rwanda raised tariffs on imported used apparel and footwear by more than one thousand percent, which effectively banned those imports, and the United States responded by suspending duty-free treatment for all apparel from Rwanda. A country willing to give up trade benefits to protect its own clothing makers is telling visitors something about how much that work matters.

The second problem is the relationship. In *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert separate relief, rehabilitation and development, and argue that relief given where people are not in crisis does harm, because it treats capable neighbors as people who need

handouts. A line of people waiting for free shirts puts the team in the role of giver and everyone else in the role of receiver, which is the opposite of what most mission partners spend the rest of the year building.

This is not a new lesson. In 2010 a campaign called 1 Million Shirts set out to collect shirts for people in Africa. Aid workers and African writers criticized it as being about the donors rather than the people receiving the shirts, and its founders ended the program, as *Entrepreneur* reported.

Can extra shirts cause trouble at customs?

A suitcase holding twenty identical new shirts does not look like personal clothing. Customs officers in many countries can treat it as goods brought in to give away, and the Logistics Cluster, the humanitarian logistics group led by the World Food Program, notes that donated goods are not automatically free of duties and taxes. Whether they are depends on each country's own rules. Your host partner knows the local rules and can tell you before you pack.

When is giving a shirt the right thing?

A shirt given as a personal gift to someone who was part of the work is a different act. The interpreter, the host family, the local pastor and the cook who fed the team for a week served with the team, so a shirt with the trip name on it marks a shared week. The best way to give those shirts is to plan them: get each person's name and size from your host partner, order them with the team's order, and give them face to face. The planning guide on who should get a mission trip t-shirt covers how to add them to the count.

If a partner tells you their community needs clothing, ask whether the money for extra shirts would do more good spent with local sellers. That keeps the purchase inside the economy the team came to serve.

What should a team do with extra shirts?

Order closely to the roster so few extras exist. The Ministry Gear size distribution guide explains how to order when some sizes are still unknown, with a small cushion rather than a box of spares. Then bring every extra home, where it still has work to do:

- Give one to each prayer partner and family that supported the team from home.

- Have the team wear the shirts on the Sunday they report back to the church, so the congregation can see who went.
- Wear them again for a local serve day, so the trip connects to service at home.
- Keep a few in the church office for the next team's commissioning, as a picture of what last year's team did.

What should you ask your host partner before you pack?

Ask three questions before the order is placed. Who on your side will serve alongside our team, and what sizes do they wear? Is there anything you would rather we not bring? Would anything we planned to bring be better bought locally? A long-term partner gets these questions less often than they should, and the answers will shape both the shirt count and the week.

To design shirts for the team and the partners who serve beside them, get your free design or call 888–812–4044, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm Pacific. A designer adds your church name, trip details and verse, and nothing prints until you approve it.

MinistryGear 888-812-4044 ministrygear.com

Ministry Gear designs custom church t-shirts for youth groups, camps, mission trips, worship teams and church events.