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Faith In Action: Sharing God's Love through Student Missions at GWU

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Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Holding flashlights while dentists pull teeth in Nicaraguan villages. Swinging hammers in American disaster areas. Using sign language to tutor children in a Honduran school for the deaf. Nursing sick people through a traveling clinic across remote Guatemalan towns. Showing love to orphans in Brazil, playing sports in the Dominican Republic, repairing toppled homes and rebuilding broken lives in nearby Shelby, N.C.

In cities around the United States and countries across the globe, ordinary Gardner-Webb students find extraordinary ways to put their faith in action through mission trips sponsored by the University's Office of Christian Life and Service.

As many as one in every 11 residential students participates in a University-sponsored mission trip each year, making Gardner-Webb one of the nation's top-ten schools for mobilizing student missionaries.

"That's just who we are at Gardner-Webb," says Dr. Tracy Jessup, vice president of Christian life and service and senior minister to the University. "Putting our faith in action is part of our identity as a University family."

Short-Term Trips, Lifelong Journey

As Jessup puts it, "A huge part of the educational experience at Gardner-Webb is helping students embark on an inward journey of faith and an outward journey of faith, to follow Jesus's two greatest commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors. That's our goal with mission trips, to learn what it means to be a loving neighbor to God's people in our own community and around the world."

During fall, spring, and summer breaks, Gardner-Webb sponsors a handful of trips to a variety of domestic and international locations. While the trips are short-term, Jessup says they make a lasting difference in the lives of students and those they serve.

“Life-changing. That’s the word we hear most often from students who participate in these trips,” Jessup says. “We charge the faculty and staff leaders on these trips to help students see the big picture, to think about how their experience on a mission will influence the way they live their lives every day, not only as students but even after they graduate. With every trip, we see students return with greater understanding of their role in God’s global work of redemption.”

Fulfilling the Great Commission

One doesn’t have to be a pastor to fulfill Jesus’s “Great Commission” to make disciples of all nations. Likewise, a major in religious studies is not required in order to participate in Gardner-Webb’s mission trips. The trips are open to every student in every program, and some are even led by faculty and designed specifically to allow students to put their majors into action.

“You don’t have to be a preacher, or an evangelist, or even a person called to long-term missions to live life on a mission with God,” Jessup says.

“Nursing students can use their calling as nurses to make a difference in the name of Christ. Business majors can help relieve economic stress for people. Teachers can use tutoring as a way of showing love to children whose parents have abandoned them. There are so many ways for students to express their love for Christ in a tangible way, and we try to give them those opportunities through a variety of trips.”

Missions At Home and Abroad

Some of Gardner-Webb’s trips involve thousands of miles of travel. Others focus on communities just minutes away from campus. As Jessup explains, offering both international and local trips is both a theological and a practical priority.

“Before Jesus ascended, he was talking to his disciples and he said, ‘You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ For the people he was speaking to, Jerusalem was home. I think that was Jesus’s way of reminding us that missions starts at home.”

Local trips offer every student an affordable opportunity to spend focused, concentrated time in service for God’s kingdom, especially with people who are nearby but often overlooked.

While international trips are more expensive, Jessup says God continually amazes him by blessing students with the resources they need to go. “Our office works hard to help students find creative ways to raise the support they need. I could tell you story after story of amazing ways that students have been blessed, even at the last minute, with gifts from unlikely sources that cover almost exactly the needed amount.”

Gardner-Webb even offers a summer missions scholarship fund to students interested in taking a trip that's not sponsored by Gardner-Webb. Thanks to the parents of Pamela Darnell, a former student who passed away and who had a passion for global missions, Gardner-Webb is able to help students go on summer trips with other churches and missions organizations each year.

"The bottom line," Jessup says, "is that we want every Gardner-Webb student who feels called to participate in missions to have these life-changing opportunities. Once you go, your lifelong faith journey will never be the same."

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University's purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).