

The Role of Short-Term Missions in a Long-Term Missions Strategy

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Just a little over three weeks ago, a group of 12 North Americans traveled from their local church in the Midwest United States to Amatitlán, Guatemala where my wife, Emily, and I had the privilege to guide them in a short-term mission project. The main objective was clear: after the group was finished they would impact the community for Christ and help plant a church with the 8 Guatemalan Nazarenes and their pastor. The week's ministry represented great sacrifice of finances, time, and energy on the part of the North Americans and months of preparation between the local leaders and ourselves. Through much painting, repairs to a ragged church building, Bible Schools, two Jesus Film showings, and street evangelism, 80 people came to know the Lord and the burgeoning local congregation initiated a presence in the community that cannot be denied. The team left fulfilled and there is a local Guatemalan church visiting new converts and engaging in discipleship literally as I write these words. Glory to God!

Short-term missions is booming like never before.¹ As a grass-roots, decentralized movement, its scope is difficult to determine. Yet a conservative estimate would be that North America sends between 1 million and 4 million short-term missionaries every year. The sociologist Christian Smith, based on national random survey data, reports that 29 percent of all 13- to 17-year-olds in the U.S. have "gone on a religious missions team or religious service project," with 10 percent having gone on such trips three or more times. That is, his data indicates that far more than 2 million

¹ I will refer to short-term missions in various parts of this paper as "STM" in order to save both space and time.

13- to 17-year-olds go on such trips every year. Many statistics say that more money is spent across the world in short-term missions than in long-term missions.²

I grew up in a local church that was radically “mission-minded.” I participated on a mission trip every summer while I was in high school and college and when I became a Youth Pastor, I obviously approached our entire ministry with a missions heart and focus. In fact, I am sitting in Guatemala City, Guatemala typing these words because I am a product of short-term missions! God called me to be a missionary and confirmed his call on my life through several indelible cross-cultural experiences as a youth. My wife, Emily, and I are currently missionaries in Mexico and Central America and have the thrill of planning and hosting many short-term missions teams every year.

So why am I so concerned about the present-day state of short-term missions? Though long overlooked as a topic of scholarly study, in recent years this phenomenon has gained the attention of more than a few writers and missiologists. Many decry the horrible mistakes made in short-term missions, even recommending that we forego the practice altogether. Others see no cause for concern and laud such ministry as a welcome transition to twenty-first century missions. Of course, the majority fall somewhere in between. Therefore, we first must briefly touch on a few key benefits of short-term missions. Then, the focus will turn toward examining the difference between potential pitfalls of short-term missions and the ways to safeguard against such mistakes. It is the hope of this author that throughout such investigation, we will be

² David A. Livermore, *Serving With Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2006; 12. Also such statistics are repeatedly treated in Roger Peterson, Gordon Aeschliman, and R. Wayne Sneed, *Maximum Impact, Short-Term Mission: The God-Commanded Repetitive Deployment of Swift, Temporary Nonprofessional Missionaries*. Minneapolis: STEM, 2003 as well as in Kurt Ver Beek and Robert Priest, “Study Questions Whether Short-Term Missions Make a Difference.” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/125/12.0.html>. June 20, 2005.

able to distinguish more clearly the role of short-term missions in a long-term missions strategy.³

Benefits of Short-Term Missions

It has long been asserted and acknowledged that short-term missions provides a fertile setting for Christians to reflect on such things as witness, service, community, sacrifice, spirituality, poverty, materialism, suffering, self-denial, justice, racism, ethnocentrism, inter-ethnic relations, globalization, stewardship, and vocation.⁴ Out of such reflection it is thought that genuine transformation can and many times will take place. “Especially for students who have been raised in environments sheltered from those ‘outside,’ short-term mission trips help them to break out of apathy and commit to caring for those of profoundly different life circumstances.”⁵ Because of their involvement in a short-term mission trip, participants oftentimes learn, grow, and want to further share in God’s mission around the world. Such participants also experience a passionate faith while being hosted by passionate people. For many pastors and youth leaders, a short-term mission trip offers a brief moment for their parishioners to experience faith with a new passion and purpose that counters the influences of a consumer-driven society.⁶

The key question is whether the desired life change really becomes permanent. In an InterVarsity survey, 28 percent of students participating in an STM said that they have joined or will join a long-term ministry outside the United States. Additionally, 51

³ As Paul Borthwick says in his foreword to *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, we must be willing to analyze “how short-term missions can best serve the global advancement of Christ’s kingdom—and not just the experiential advancement of Christians who are wealthy enough to participate in global adventures” (7-8).

⁴ Ver Beek and Priest 4.

⁵ Richard Slimbach, “First, Do No Harm: Short-term Missions at the Dawn of a New Millennium,” *EMQ* (October 2000): 430.

⁶ Terence D. Linhart, “They Were So Alive: the Spectacle Self and Youth Group Short-Term Mission Trips,” 2005: 2.

percent said that they had increased their financial support for worldwide missions. Several studies have been done that indicate that in many cases small and large changes can be detected in participants months and even years after their STM experience.⁷

Pitfalls of STM and Ways to Avoid Them

However, an increasing number of scholars debate these findings and question the long-term impact of short-term trips upon participants. Some studies demonstrate that while participants return home with grand hopes of spending less, evangelizing, and praying more, most resort back to the same assumptions and behaviors they had prior to the trip.⁸ Others are even more critical. David Maclure argues that not only do these trips not provoke a lasting change in the participants; they actually perpetuate the very things they are intended to oppose. “Instead of advancing the cause of mission, the exercise simply reinforces worn stereotypes and old power relations.”⁹

So as the debate rages, the concern of this paper is to help STM in the Church of the Nazarene avoid some of the pitfalls that have come up in the past, allowing it to fit into and assist the long-term missions strategy of the denomination. While STM may not always or automatically produce desired results, the right sorts of STM, carried out in the right sorts of ways, and accompanied by the right sorts of reflections, have potential for good. Therefore, in the coming pages six key pitfalls that have ransacked

⁷ Jonathan Rice, “The New Missions Generation.” *Christianity Today Online*. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/19.100.html>. 31 August 2006: 2.

⁸ Terence D. Linhart, “The Curricular Nature of Youth Group Short-Term Cross-Cultural Service Projects,” (PhD: diss., Purdue University, 2004); David A. Livermore, “AmeriCAN or AmeriCAN’T? A Critical Analysis of Western Training to the World,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40; Kurt Ver Beek, *The Impact of Short-Term Missions: A Case Study of House Construction in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch*, <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt.htm>. May 3, 2005.

⁹ David Maclure, “Wholly Available? Missionary Motivation where Consumer Choice Reigns,” <http://www.williamcarey.org.uk/FILES/essay1.htm>. William Carey, 2001.

STM will be examined and, in each case, a healthy alternative will be offered. By following these alternatives, the author believes that short-term missions can transform itself into a potent strategy for aiding long-term mission strategy and thus, fulfilling the Great Commission.

1. Ill-Prepared versus Well-Prepared

Many of the nonsensical behaviors, miscommunication, and cultural blunders that ensue in a STM experience can be warded off with better orientation and pre-field preparation. Sadly, many participants arrive to the field with little or no training or communication with their direct field supervisor. Moreover, although preparation can be beneficial, adequate training needs to be more than a few group meetings during Sunday School in the weeks before boarding a plane. What is the nature of solid pre-field training? Much preparation in the past has been limited to a discussion of program logistics (obtaining passports, raising support, etc.) and teaching or evangelistic techniques (“how to” put on a Bible School, share the Evangecube, give a testimony). However, short-term participants must receive pre-field preparation in basic language, nuances of the host culture, etc. Kurt Ver Beek and Robert Priest note that when STM experiences included culture-learning exercises both before and during the trip, then participants exemplified less ethnocentrism.¹⁰

Douglas Rutt even maintains (and rightly so) that all short-term missionaries should be led through a study of missions from a biblical and theological perspective. Although no one would suggest that each participant need become an expert in theology, it is necessary that she see and understand how what she does fits into the

¹⁰ Ver Beek and Priest, 4.

mission Dei, or the wider scope of God's missional work through history.¹¹ Numerous other authors strongly suggest that such training not be relegated to mere didactic Bible study either. If participants are to truly understand and embody the Great Commission, Richard Slimbach urges them to prepare by doing missions in one's local community. In this way, training will aide our members in "reclaiming the call to mission starting at their own Jerusalem" and in "seeking to be authentically missionary at their own doorstep." As we also prioritize mission(s) in our Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, we should aim to see fewer short-termers venturing forth from isolated suburbs at home to exotic places abroad without first going through the center of the city.¹²

2. Paternalism versus Indigenous Church

David Bosch has said that missionaries in the past (both short-term and long-term) have many times been unfortunately "predisposed not to appreciate the cultures of the people to whom they went" but instead to sweep aside the good of such cultures "by a mentality shaped by the Enlightenment which tended to turn people into objects."¹³ Sadly, these same attitudes and practices still pervade much of what we do in missions. In fact, as we have already seen in part, many would say that short-term missions actually promotes paternalism. Many participants return home speaking and writing of what they did to or for the nationals, but not with them. John McKnight has referred to this outcome of missions service as "disabling help" and Paulo Freire as "malevolent generosity."¹⁴ Too many national churches and their perceived successes become

¹¹ Douglas L. Rutt, "What a Mission Executive Would Like Those Involved in Short-term Mission to Know," <http://www.tiu.edu/files/divinity/phd/ics/rutt05.pdf>. 2005: 2-3.

¹² Slimbach 436, 439.

¹³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, 1993: 294.

¹⁴ Slimbach 431. Additionally, Linhart (in "They Were So Alive"; p. 5) warns that the speed of a short-term experience and the implicit emphasis on appearances and spectacle foster a near-necessity to stereotype. With limited time to truly know the culture and people, the tendency naturally will be to reduce any complexity to simple, manageable stereotypes about the unknown setting. The spectacle of

totally dependent on outside groups for their ministry vision, finances, and programs. Frighteningly, many groups seem to embrace the paternalism created by their financial ability to “make it happen.”¹⁵

For STM to rid itself of one of its ugliest byproducts, drastic change must take place. Every trip must center on how the community feels about itself and its level of motivation after the group leaves and not merely on whether they have a new coat of paint on the church or a set of new latrines. If community members feel empowered, to do good work together, and if the STM group helps them to see their own strengths and abilities—then they will likely keep doing exciting work on their own. But if the community feels weak and poor after the visit from the outsiders—if they feel they need others to come and help them with their next project—then the new building may not have been worth it.

To reiterate, all STMs must pay much more attention, not to the work they do (how many teeth they pulled, bricks they laid, or tracts they handed out), but to the families’, churches’, and communities’ view of themselves. The best way to make sure that the indigenous church will feel motivated and empowered by a one-week visit is to think seriously about it beforehand, and to work with organizations, missionaries, and others who are concerned and making such ministry happen year round.¹⁶

In terms of the Church of the Nazarene, creating and encouraging an indigenous church means contact primarily with the district and local churches before, during, and after short-term trips. The trip must fit into the local and district strategy; furthermore, the trip’s vision and objectives need to be set by leaders at these levels of the church (as

the mission trip focuses “on the ones who had the resources to fly in and fly out and created a barrier between the students and hosts toward authentic understanding of the people, of cross-cultural service, and of missions.”

¹⁵ Rick Johnson, “Going South of the Border: Lessons Learned Working with the Poor,” *Short-Term Missions Today (2003/2004 Edition)*; 101.

¹⁶ Ver Beek and Priest 10-11.

opposed to being set by visiting short-termers or even regional and field leadership).¹⁷

In fact, although it seems obvious, it is essential that the district and local church ask for and desire a short-term team in the first place. If the ministry plans and strategies of such leaders do not encompass the hosting of short-term teams, it makes little sense to continue encouraging short-term teams to come to such places. An indigenous church will make decisions that fit within local vision and strategy and we will do well to foster and encourage such crucial decision-making if we ever hope to distance ourselves from the paternalism so often present in STM.¹⁸

3. Superficiality versus Substance

Many times what we offer (as mission organizations, long-termers, etc.) is indeed very superficial. I believe this is due to two realities. First, as Nicholas Shepherd asserts, superficiality is subconsciously what many short-termers actually want in the first place.¹⁹ Many of us deep down do not want our lives to drastically

¹⁷ Many have suggested that all power and decision-making be transferred to local leadership in order to protect against paternalism. However, this probably should never be the goal. Although the indigenous church needs to set the vision and plan the strategy for short-term mission teams and ministry, the ideal would be to develop a mutually beneficial relationship between visitors and hosts. Such a relationship will include respect of leadership, experience, and vision of the local host while also being accepting and supportive of the unique needs and experiences of the visitor. The hope is for both partner organizations to develop a cross-cultural, multi-cultural sensitivity. Merely reversing the relations of domination in no way guarantees that. (For more on this subject, see Edwin Zehner, *Short-Term Missions: A View From the Field*, <http://www.tiu.edu/divinity/academics/phd/ics/abstracts/zehner05>, 2005: 6-7).

¹⁸ There are increasingly high numbers of world areas that are responding to the offer of missions groups by saying, “Thanks, but no thanks. We are doing fine without short-termers, and actually feel as if traditional ‘Work and Witness’ in our areas would stunt the growth that is already taking place.” This has occurred in many places where the indigenous church has experienced persecution or great sacrifice. The fear of local leaders seems to be that anything closely related to “hand-outs” will cut the evangelistic growth by creating dependency on the outsider and not on the Holy Spirit. I have heard such stories from India, the Horn of Africa, and China, to name a few.

Also important to note is that many times a short-term mission has been done backwards. That is to say, a team wants to come and so we approach the national church leaders and say, “Where can we put them?” Thus, an environment has often been created where nationals are not ready for a team nor do they envision how the team can fit into and promulgate local ministry strategies, but they agree to host the team for fear of not receiving the money that accompanies such workers.

¹⁹ Nicholas Shepherd, “Soul in the City—Mission as Package Holiday: The Potential Implications of a ‘Tourist’ Paradigm in Youth Mission,” 2005: 9-14. I would highly recommend Shepherd’s article, especially as it regards our tendency to “stage authenticity of mission.”

change as a result of a mission trip. True transformation in the nitty-gritty details of our life is always messy and will be viewed oftentimes as radical and even overly fanatical by our peers. It is much easier to visit a foreign land, give of ourselves in what we feel is genuine sacrifice, and return to the normalcy of life as we know—and enjoy—it. It does not hurt that the whole process usually is fun and can be added to our social and literal resumes in the future (“I went to Guatemala to feed the homeless!”).

All of this adds to our propensity as trip planners to give the visiting groups exactly what they want. Just enough ministry to make them feel worthwhile and provide them statistics they can take home with them—data that inspires. Just enough leisure to appease the part of them that really wanted to come to the mission field for the adventure and change of pace. And just enough interaction with the culture and with the people that the visiting group can be awed and even shocked by what they see, but not upset or made truly uncomfortable. It is always wonderful to experience the hospitality of a new culture, but when dinner goes past 8pm and the hosts serve chicken and rice for the fifth time this week, well, a line has to be drawn somewhere, doesn't it?

The second reason we opt for superficial options over substance is because we know deep-down that, in many cases, these groups are not needed to do ministry effectively on the mission field. This truth is evident from the now famous study of Kurt Ver Beek about short-term missions in Honduras after the destruction of Hurricane Mitch. After years of research and dialogue with visiting and host participants, Ver Beek determined, “The North American work teams seemed to have little or no lasting impact on the communities—either positive or negative.”²⁰ This unsettling conclusion calls into question the millions of hours and dollars spent by short-termers, their churches, and missions agencies in order to assist a community in desperate need. As

²⁰ Ver Beek 7.

long-term missionaries, we usually recognize one uncomfortable fact: if short-termers would forego coming in person and instead send money and resources spent on plane tickets, etc. the mission field would in many cases be better off. It is not that short-term missions does not bless the visiting or national churches and participants; there is much blessing for all involved, most of all in the relationships formed. However, for many it seems difficult to justify the millions of dollars spent to bring groups to world areas when that money could be invested to help more people in need as well as providing employment for national workers that desperately need it (and oftentimes can accomplish the task better and in less time than a visiting group anyway).

Consider that the majority of community members in Ver Beek's survey, along with five out of six mission agencies, leaned toward asking the North Americans to stay home and donate the money they raised to the housing projects during the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch instead of spending some of those resources on coming to Honduras themselves.²¹ Leaders often organize superficial trips because deep-down we know STM is not the most effective tool for the task at hand! As long-termers we try to create and organize meaningful events, but if we were honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that our hearts and heads are unsure that ministry is done best in this manner. However, changing the mega-enterprise known as short-term mission seems ominous and even impossible, and so long-term leaders labor day after day in such ministry, almost unwilling to examine if (and much less advocate) that a massive re-tooling is in order.

Perhaps the necessary change is simpler than it seems. Put substance before superficiality. If we know ministry could be done another way more effectively, as

²¹ Ibid. 7-8, 16. These responses were offered to the following question: "If you could choose whether to have another short-term group come down and build two homes or to have this group stay home and send you the money they would have spent on travel expenses (which would allow you to build 10 extra homes) which would you choose?"

leaders we must halt and strongly suggest that resources are used more wisely. If in the past the needs and desires of the STM group have come before the needs and desires of the national church, a re-evaluation needs to occur. Are short-term missionaries needed? If so, when and where? Communication between short- and long-term missionaries and agencies and the local/national church is the key, especially in the recruiting of short-term teams. I have found that most short-termers genuinely want to make a difference and are willing to adapt to the needs of the nationals. Is a group only willing to do construction when the real need in a certain community is compassionate ministries? Are they set on doing evangelism their way with their tools or are they open to learning and change? If a group is inflexible in their desires and there is genuinely no need for such a team in the area, their offer of a team is politely declined. There are certainly other opportunities in other areas or with other organizations for a group with their specific experience and desires for ministry.

However, most leaders and team members catch the vision for a project after they know that they will be meeting an authentic need in the host country. My wife and I agree that what energizes nearly all of the wonderful short-termers we have come in contact with is not tourism or doing ministry “their way.” It is meeting the existent needs of a real community alongside an authentic group of indigenous believers. That is a description of substance and not superficiality.²²

4. “To” or “For” versus “With”: (Adventure versus Community)

Participants involve themselves in mission projects out of a variety of motivations. For several it is one option among many for their summer holiday. The

²² Short-termers who are willing to experience missions in just such a way will come face-to-face with a person, presence, or relationship that demands an ethical response, and such an encounter will create a deep sense of vulnerability within the visiting short-term missionaries. Although uncomfortable, we need to provide just such experiences for our visitors! (For more on this see Linhart, “They Were So Alive”; 3).

purpose oftentimes is “to experience this extra-ordinary event as something different to normality.”²³ A person’s choice to “do mission” in their leisure time is positive and to be valued; they most likely have some desire to put their faith in practice. However, when a short-term mission trip becomes the only avenue for doing just that, it is a crooked view of the Great Commission, indeed. Moreover, when short-term participants are drawn more to the promised thrill of a cross-cultural experience rather than the opportunity to commit to host community members, the entire “ministry” is built on a shaky and erroneous foundation from its initial stages.

One way to construct STM on a solid foundation is to prioritize ministry *with*, not *for* or *to*. Authentic mission needs authentic cultural contact and exchange between the gospel and the local community.²⁴ Short-term mission when done appropriately is always an exercise in community. An effective trip will have as much or more to do with fellowship across cultural and ethnic lines as with accomplishing a slew of projects for the locals. In Ver Beek’s analysis, the North American work teams missed many opportunities to have a more positive impact. If the visiting groups had gotten more involved in the Honduran communities (attending church services, eating meals together, etc.), they would have built stronger relationships and demonstrated to the Hondurans that they were there not only to give of time, energy, and money, but of themselves.²⁵

With this truth in mind, we have attempted to transform our ministry with short-termers. In every trip that we plan, we seek opportunities for the visitors to walk and work alongside local Christians, rather than doing things for them. Without exception, participating in a missions trip that we organize will entail working, eating, and in many

²³ Shepherd 7.

²⁴ As discussed in many seminal texts on mission: A. J. Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1999; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, London, 1989; and Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.

²⁵ Ver Beek 16.

cases living with the nationals. All of this takes more time and energy in some cases, but ministering *with* and not merely *to* or *for* the nationals will assure that not only a church is built, but also trust and relationships.

5. Doing versus Learning (Task versus Relationship)

Closely related to the issue just addressed, the focus of effective short-term missions will be on learning as opposed to doing. More important to the effectiveness of a trip is not one's ability to weld or paint, but rather the willingness to learn from the national church and do what is needed. Many times churches dictate, "We want to do a Vacation Bible School," or promote the trip around all the things the group will accomplish (for example, "We will be evangelizing eight hours a day"). Perhaps a better approach would be to show humility and a willingness to *learn* more than *do*.²⁶

Short-term missionaries must assume the roles of student and friend (learning and sharing with host culture members) instead of teacher and server (what they do to and for host culture members).²⁷ Is teaching and serving wrong? Of course not. Yet, many times we assume either that the locals need to be taught basic ministry principles or that we must serve and do for them things that they cannot. In both cases, the assumption is that the locals do not have adequate tools and cannot do something for themselves. Many times, although nationals evangelize and engage in construction projects in different ways, the effectiveness and "results" are just as great if not greater than our own. Learning, loving, living with—this is when true ministry occurs.

In order to re-direct our focus on learning and relationship, perhaps all short-termers should ask themselves some simple questions. Is our purpose to achieve immediate goal gratification or to initiate and maintain meaningful relationships? What

²⁶ Ver Beek, Priest 13.

²⁷ Slimbach 434.

does a successful trip look like? If we leave with all tasks accomplished, does that mean ministry has occurred? Was the trip truly worth the time and money if that is the case? Local impact in the majority of cultures in the world will be measured by investment in relationship and not in completion of tasks.

This is usually so difficult for North Americans. We like to see the results of our work and the task is almost always quantifiable and visual! We just put up a building! We just evangelized and won 80 souls to Christ! It is recognizably more difficult to see and quantify the “results” of building relationships. I recently heard from some colleagues of mine who work as long-term missionaries and whose primary job description is to host short-term missions groups. They were updating me on their ministry and informed me that they had just put up seven church structures in a two-week period using one short-term team of 15 individuals. With my North American mindset, I expressed surprise and complemented them on their hard work. However, my friends began to wearily lament about the group’s staunch unwillingness to do anything the missionaries or locals suggested, their insistence on doing things their way and with their tools, and their complete lack of interaction with the host congregations. Seven church buildings in two weeks? They would have been exponentially more effective having put up one while living with and learning from the locals.²⁸

6. Isolation versus Integration

While isolation versus integration seems to refer to the mixing of visiting and local groups, ministering “with”, etc., the terms are used in this case to address isolation or integration of a variety of ministries. Many short-term participants and even some

²⁸ “Meaningful opportunities emerge when individuals seek to learn as much as they seek to teach, listen rather than just speak, observe as oppose to constantly ‘doing’ ...Projects, schedules, and finishing the task at hand are just not as important as people and relationships. Understanding and appreciating this intrinsic dynamic alone would reform many outreach approaches” (Johnson 127).

long-term missionaries view the average STM experience as possessing an extremely limited focus. On one trip a group may be needed for construction; another group will travel just to do evangelism; still another group dedicates their time and money to do more explicit “compassionate ministries.” At first glance, this seems both logical and necessary; different needs will often dictate who is recruited and for what area, ministry, etc.

Yet, such narrowly-focused trips create a few problems. First, ministry in such STM experiences is seen as isolated and “specialized” instead of holistic, as it should be. After the rains from Hurricane Stan in 2005 caused thousands of Guatemalans to lose family and homes to the rampant mudslides, the initial needs were obvious (drinking water, clothing, food, and rebuilding of shelter for those affected). In the months afterward, the Church of the Nazarene mobilized workers and met many of those most basic needs.

One short-term group of college students from a Nazarene university had the unenviable task of rebuilding sewage lines in a small community close to a Nazarene church (that was what was needed!). Several non-Christian community members came up to me as these students and the local Nazarenes were playing soccer and interacting with the children in a Vacation Bible School. They began to tearfully express thanks, but I was somewhat taken aback at the cause of their gratitude. In that moment they did not focus their thanks on our help in repairing the community sewage lines (although they had already let it be known over and over that they were grateful for that!); they wept out of gratitude for coming and playing with their kids. One mother said that, before this group came, her daughter had not been able to think about anything but her father who had passed away in the mudslides months before. Yet, now she was laughing and singing with the clowns and puppets for the first time in five months. She

thanked us profusely for the Bible School (and not as much for the “real” work we had done). If we would have viewed this trip as solely construction and community service, we would have missed out on a vital ministry opportunity for this devastated family.²⁹

The second problem that we encounter when isolating and fragmenting our STM ministry is that doing so fails to recognize that people are created very differently. The nationals certainly have different needs and personalities and must be ministered to in different ways. And of course it is not difficult to recognize that short-termers bring a wealth of various talents and experience with them on a trip. When we promote a ministry trip that focuses exclusively on evangelism ministries, or solely on construction, or on isolated compassionate ministries, each time we knowingly or unknowingly exclude a large portion of our congregations from participating. Of course, many people would say that true commitment would mean a person considering a STM trip should not pick and choose a trip based on one’s likes or tastes. Still, would it not be better to promote trips where any willing Christian can go and be used in a variety of ways? With integrated ministry, short-term missions can even become an effective tool for challenging participants to minister in areas and ways they previously thought impossible (thus, developing their talents and skills in more than one area, as well).³⁰

7. Short-Term Results versus Long-Term Follow-up

Finally, in almost every case of STM focus is placed on the trip itself much more than the follow-up afterwards. This is one crucial area where short-term missions often

²⁹ See also Slimbach, p. 439, for a view of other “balanced daily activities” that may be incorporated into STM experiences.

³⁰ A form of integrated ministry called Máxima Mission is being used with great results in much of Latin America. This retooling of short-term missions intends to integrate ministry while meeting five fundamental needs: compassion, discipleship, evangelism, fellowship, and service. Certainly we, as leaders of Maxima Mission in the Church of the Nazarene in México and Central America, have much to learn and improve with regards to this program, but our attempt has been to do missions as an integrated community, holistically and formatively, and for the benefit of both the national and visiting church.

clashes with and even hinders long-term mission in a community. If many short- and long-term missionaries were to adopt a long-term view of a short-term trip, significant change would occur both in the visiting and local groups. Intentional, significant follow-up must occur both in the host community and for the visitors after they have returned home.

I must testify that many ministry coordinators (me included) have fallen prey to hectic scheduling and unrealistic expectations. The bulk of many of our ministries entails short-term mission trips, so we literally focus on the *trip* itself without placing adequate emphasis on meaningful follow-up. This practice seems to favor the claim that God has sent workers out to plant seed while committing the harvest to the Lord. However, all too often this approach “mocks sound Biblical principles and the seed is cast to the wind.”³¹

One way to protect against this tendency is to insure that short-termers are vitally involved with long-term missionaries and organizations or denominations. The key, then, rests in the willingness of local and missionary leaders to truly follow-up with congregations that have received short-term groups in the past. Obviously a long-term missionary’s schedule may not permit him to do hands-on follow-up with every group. Nevertheless, if district, local, and national leaders are involved and in charge of the planning and implementing of the strategy before, during, and after the trip, a reasonable safeguard can be created. Ver Beek’s conclusion is significant: “The relationship between community and organization most likely can predict the level of lasting change on the community and the families involved.”³²

Still, what about follow-up with the visitors who have returned to their home country after experiencing change during their ministry time in another culture? We

³¹ Johnson 100.

³² Ver Beek 20.

have already seen that many studies find no significant measurable change in the majority of participants after they go back home. Participants *intend* to make changes in their life, but usually fall back into old routines.³³ As Linhart correctly declares, “The ethical hope for many who facilitate short-term mission is that the encounter will raise awareness, foster deeper faith, improve Godly character, and foster deeper compassion toward others. The problem comes when the ‘raising of awareness’ results in no action and people only *feel* connected to missions, or that they have performed their duty but continue in normal cultural patterns without a nod toward new directions for service and mission.”³⁴

Certainly one way to protect against this faux connection to ministry and missions is to have significant times of debriefing with team members after they return home and, if schedule permits, even nightly during the short-term trip itself.³⁵

However, something much more profound needs to take place in the faith communities where those participants live and worship daily. Churches must engage in intentional activities to ensure that dramatic positive changes are sustained. A church that sends youth to Mexico, while ignoring Mexican immigrants all around, may be undercutting the very likelihood of sustained positive results in the lives of its youth. A church, on the other hand, which fosters the sorts of interethnic service and witness at home that it practices abroad may find that desired results in the lives of youth are more likely to be sustained over the course of time.³⁶

³³ Ver Beek and Priest, 3-5.

³⁴ Linhart, “They Were So Alive,” 3.

³⁵ See Ver Beek and Priest, p. 5, where they give several tangible suggestions for follow-up and note the following: “It’s not about how good the orientation is before they go, and it’s only somewhat about the experience itself. The key to long-lasting change is having structures in place to help us stay motivated and excited about our goals.”

³⁶ Ibid. 4-5.

Conclusion

Short-term missions is here to stay. Moreover, it appears to be a method of missions that God is blessing and using to advance his purposes around the globe. The pitfalls and risks of STM are numerous and I have attempted in this paper to acknowledge seven such dangers candidly. Nevertheless, this long-term missionary continues to possess a heart that beats for short-term missions! Of course, I believe the practice needs to undergo a drastic self-evaluation and retooling in order to avoid the snares that have entangled us in the past. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to offer seven alternatives for such pitfalls, for I am convinced that re-establishing STM in this manner will assist and actually reinvigorate our long-term mission strategies and practices.

It is my deep desire that we be more effective in cross-cultural ministry in the future. It is my sincere hope that more scholarship regarding this crucial wave of missions involvement will follow, including research into the dynamics of short-term missions “from everywhere to everywhere.”³⁷ Together may we examine our ministries, asking the tough questions and adapting ourselves and our practices as needed. Without such willingness, the Church will continue to flounder in its old paradigms while expecting different results from the same methods. However, *with* such transformation, I am convinced that we will be able to look back years from now, point to this crucial juncture in history, and proclaim humbly, “God changed his Church and the world through us! To God be the glory!”

³⁷ I take this phrase from the Peruvian missiologist, Samuel Escobar. Truly, missions has become a practice of all nations where there are Christians present. My hope is that one day soon we will see more research and study regarding the sending of increasing numbers of short-term missionaries from countries and cultures that have traditionally been labeled “receiving” in the past.

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