

THE PRIORITY OF INCARNATIONAL MISSIONS: OR “IS THE TAIL OF VOLUNTEERISM WAGGING THE DOG?”

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most notable trend in missions in the past quarter century has been the rise of volunteer mission teams. These teams travel overseas for brief periods (1-4 weeks)¹ and perform varied services. Some teams function strictly within the realm of humanitarian work (hunger relief, medical missions, agriculture); some teams combine humanitarian work with evangelism or other church-related functions; some teams minister to missionaries themselves; and, some teams focus exclusively on evangelism, church planting, and leadership training. Alone, Southern Baptist churches sent out more than 30,000 volunteers overseas last year,² and these figures reflect only those Southern Baptist churches that communicated with the International Mission Board—many do not. Missiologist Ralph Winter noted that “nearly 2 million short-termers leave the United States each year compared to 35,000 long-term missionaries.”³

Volunteer mission teams fulfill numerous positive roles: they provide needed medical care in regions where such care is limited or unavailable; they draw crowds simply by virtue of being exotic visitors; they serve alongside career missionaries and thus assist these missionaries to fulfill their strategies; they minister to missionaries and nationals by providing much-needed “shots in the arm” spiritually, strategically, physically, and emotionally; they expose many to overseas service and thus create a new interest in missions at home; and the list goes on.⁴ The multitude of volunteers fulfilling these functions causes many to rejoice in this trend.

¹Some groups use the term “short-term” to refer to this, but the IMB uses the term “volunteer.”

²“Volunteers in Missions,” available at <http://going.imb.org/vim/main/default.asp>; accessed 6 August 2007.

³Michelle Vu, “12 Mistakes Mission Agencies Should Avoid,” *The Christian Post*, available at <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20071105/29964.htm>; accessed 24 November 2007.

⁴For example, Stan May, “Short-Term Mission Trips Are Great If . . .,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 6 no 4 (October 2000): 444-49.

While these numbers seem to signal an unprecedented interest in overseas work, they also may awaken serious concerns. These concerns stem from a missiological appraisal of the volunteer situation. For the time being, volunteers will continue to go from churches across America, and volunteers are not necessarily bad. I applaud volunteers who fill any role that furthers the missionary's strategy and advances the kingdom. Volunteers complement the work of career missionaries, but the core strategy of every mission board must be built around and upon career missionaries—those who sense a call from God, leave family, friends, and familiarity, and plant their lives in another country with a commitment to learn the language and culture of a new people group in order to communicate a contextualized gospel message, plant indigenous churches, and train leaders so that the work survives. Evangelism that results in churches has been an International Mission Board thrust for 20 years, because churches are God's primary tools to disciple and perfect the nations.

Lest anyone think that this concern is simply peripheral, some now argue that the day of the career missionary is over—that volunteers are a better investment of time, money, and priorities. Kent Hall of Buckner International argued for a cessation of career missionaries, and to make his point, asked, "Is it the best use of our resources to train a handful of professionals to go in our place?" He argued that Paul "went on a series of relatively short-term missionary journeys," and then stated, "Career missionaries—by and large—are the exception to the biblical model, not the norm."⁵

This article addresses missiological concerns about volunteer missions. Key issues concern the fitness of volunteers to fulfill the ministry for which they travel, their functions overseas, and their focus. Finally, the article addresses the question, "Is the tail of volunteerism wagging the dog of missiology?" Are agencies making decisions about missionary work in light of the volunteer movement that might ultimately derail the career mission movement?

THE FITNESS OF VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers must be fit to serve in missions overseas. This fitness involves physical readiness to endure the difficulties of functioning in another climate, spiritual maturity to accomplish God's agenda for the trip, and actual usefulness for the assigned task. Physical readiness is perhaps the most obvious of these qualifications, and United States citizens seem to lag behind the world in this area. Stories abound of nationals who criticize volunteers because they cannot handle heat, terrain, food, and other discomforts of the host country. Physically unhealthy volunteers add stress to the team leader and may even bring reproach on the name of Christ.

Spiritual maturity matters even more in cross-cultural ministry trips. Volunteers must be ready to give a reason for the hope within them (1 Pet. 3:15), and this readiness includes the ability to address issues in the culture with which the gospel may clash. They

⁵Ken Camp, "The Great Commission: What is the Future of Missionaries?" available at <http://www.abpnews.com/2643.article>; accessed 27 December 2007.

need to be faithful witnesses at home before they ever go overseas; sadly, this is often not the case. Dan R. Crawford writes about those who travel overseas but do not witness at home:

That's one reason mission trips have been so popular. I can easily get a group of Christians to go across the country or to another country to share their faith in Christ. But getting them to share their faith where they live is tough. In the far away place, the non-Christian can't compare my verbal witness with my lifestyle, so it is easy to witness verbally. The closer one gets to home the harder it is to witness verbally if the lifestyle and the verbal witness do not harmonize.⁶

Spiritual maturity goes beyond evangelism. Volunteers must manifest a Christian lifestyle that qualifies them to speak to the nationals, or just to gain a hearing.

This Christian lifestyle means that the Bible is more than a mantelpiece decoration—volunteers must know the Bible well enough to use it as their teaching guide, and it must direct their thought processes so that they think biblically. Only as they breathe the air of Scripture will the nationals see a genuine love for the Lord Jesus. This love of the Word needs to be coupled with a passion for prayer that harnesses the believer to Christ for His power and love. Cross-cultural change-agents must be people of prayer, or they will fulfill Lesslie Newbigin's charge that "western Christian missions have been one of the greatest secularizing forces in history."⁷ Prayer—public, open prayer for individuals and groups—reflects genuine faith in a mighty God. Such prayer testifies eloquently to nationals, while many volunteer trips, even those dedicated to "prayer-walking," seem to emphasize little actual prayer.

Finally, volunteers must actually fulfill a useful role for their assigned task. Volunteers who teach must know their fields, must demonstrate competency, and must serve the nationals to help them move toward maturity in Christ or at least greater openness to His claims on their lives. Competency in a needed field counts as a "fitness" volunteers should possess before embarking on a volunteer trip.

FUNCTIONS OF VOLUNTEERS

As volunteers go, their fitness should prepare them to fulfill needed functions. In order to function effectively, they must understand their place in the framework of missiology. Volunteers are not missionaries, but they can be used by God to fulfill

⁶Dan R. Crawford, *Discipleshape: Twelve Weeks to Spiritual Fitness*, Calvin Miller (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 127.

⁷Quoted in Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3d ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 418.

missionary strategies, and they ought to return from their trips with the awareness that they need further training to fulfill God's calling on their lives.

Volunteers are not missionaries.

Often volunteers are called "missionaries" by their churches, and churches even adopt slogans such as "Every Member a Missionary." In truth, every member is not a missionary. All members should be mission-minded and involved in fulfilling the great commission; but all members are not missionaries, just as all members should be ministry-minded but all are not called to vocational ministry. While many churches boast, "Every Member a Minister," no church has the slogan, "Every Member a Pastor."

Career mission service is much like marriage. People leave their job, family, and friends to embark on a new life. This is not two weeks of "roughing it," but a radically different lifestyle that accepts new challenges and leaves old comforts behind. Just as marriage means that the couple wakes up every day, lives together, and works out differences in their relationship, so career missions service means that missionaries pay the price to serve overseas long-term. The real difference between volunteers and career missionaries is the return-trip ticket. Many who participate in volunteer trips are unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to follow God's call in such a dramatic way.

Volunteers can assist missionaries.

Volunteers serve in a variety of roles, but all of these roles are complementary. Volunteers with proper training and skill sets can assist missionaries as they fulfill their strategies. They can open doors of ministry and further the cause of Christ. Untrained mission volunteers often cause so much trouble that missionaries choose to put them "where they will do the least harm." While no one would bring in untrained people to perform surgeries, teach in universities, or repair expensive equipment, churches routinely send people overseas without either training or extensive preliminary preparation for the trip itself. Such volunteers hurt the work and insult the nationals. Always, the best thing that volunteers can do is to assist the career missionary's strategy, to minister to the missionary, and to leave a positive impact for Christ in the minds and hearts of the nationals.

Volunteerism ought to lead to trained missionaries.

Those who travel overseas on volunteer trips should come back with a passion to give, pray, and go; they should also return home with a new realization about the need for the proper training for missionaries. Sadly, this is not always the case.

I recently counseled a couple who were hoping to enter missionary service. The husband was an aeronautical engineer for an overnight freight company, taught a Sunday school class at his church, and had participated in a volunteer trip. When I asked the husband about seminary preparation, the man stated that he did not have time to gain education, since he only had a year to finish out the paperwork and go. I asked him, "Who will take your position? Do you think I could?" He replied, "What is your degree?"

I answered, “History, but I’ve always wanted to be an engineer.” He responded, “You couldn’t do the job; you’re not trained.”

I answered, “That’s the same way I feel about you going to serve overseas and start churches without training. The decisions you make will affect churches and the work in that country for decades to come.” His willingness to go without training and preparation stemmed from a view of missions that had come from a volunteer trip.

FOCUS OF VOLUNTEERS

Is the tail of volunteerism wagging the dog of missiology? In other words, are the tried and true methods established over decades by valiant missionaries—such as John Nevius, Roland Allen, Donald McGavran, and others—now being degraded by the headlong flight to accommodate volunteers? While doing much good, volunteers may actually derail the work of mission agencies in at least four areas: volunteers take resources; volunteers hamper the call to career missions; volunteers redirect career missionary activity; and volunteers create dependency.

Volunteers Take Resources.

The recent devaluing of the US dollar strains every mission agency. Volunteer teams exacerbate this strain by siphoning off dollars that could be used for career missions. Ralph Winter lamented, “It costs at least five times more overall to send a short-timer than a long-term missionary—financial support that . . . would be better invested in a long-term missionary.”⁸ If Winter’s assessment of almost 2 million volunteers per year is correct, and the average cost is around \$2,000.00, then Americans spend almost \$4 billion dollars on volunteer trips!⁹

Volunteers Hamper the Call to Career Missions.

Mission agencies tout volunteer trips as one of the primary recruiting tools for career missions—and indeed some who go on volunteer trips do end up serving as career missionaries. The vast majority of volunteers, however, stay in America; even groups that tout volunteer trips as a way to gain career missionaries admit this. Short-Term Evangelical Missions (STEM) commissioned a 1999 research survey that polled 432 individuals who had taken one or more short-term trips. When asked about their opinions about serving as full-time/career missionaries, sixty responded that they had taken positive steps toward full-time service or were already serving. Of these 60, 32 had already been in these categories before going on a short-term trip.¹⁰ By STEM’s own statistics, approximately 6 percent of short-

⁸Winter, “12 Mistakes.”

⁹This writer has found no hard figures for the average cost of a mission trip, but most websites indicate a larger cost per person. The figure above may be conservative.

¹⁰Daniel P. McDonough and Roger P. Peterson, *CAN SHORT-TERM MISSION REALLY CREATE LONG-TERM MISSIONARIES?: Results of STEM’s Second Major*

term trip participants were moving toward or had moved toward career service. This small number may suggest that the trend is not as pronounced as some suggest.

Greater concern arises, however, when volunteers see their volunteer service as a replacement for career service. David Blackney listed as the number one danger of volunteer missions the idea that “short-term activities equal mission work.”¹¹ Missiologist Ed Stetzer, director of research for LifeWay Christian Resources, noted, “I praise God for the volunteer mission work that is taking place, but if we’re not careful, it can be a double-edged sword. Too often, it turns into tourist missions and not genuine mission engagement. . . . The reality is that in much of global missions, often engagement takes long-term incarnational missionaries living in context, understanding the language and culture, and planting biblical churches. You can’t do that when you have to go home on Thursday.”¹² Career missionaries are the *sine qua non* of mission strategy, and the competition from volunteerism slows down rather than increases missionary appointments. In fact, Bill Waldrop noted an actual decline of 16 percent in North American career missionary appointments between 1988 and 1992 (though Southern Baptists are reversing this trend).¹³

Volunteers redirect career activity.

Career missionaries form the centerpiece for any missions strategy for several reasons: they are “on the ground”; they know the language and culture; they have built relationships from which all true ministry flows; they know how to function in the host country; and they know what to do and what not to do. They build plans to reach their people, start churches, train leaders, and eventually see God produce multiplying churches that reach their own people and surrounding peoples with the gospel. They are the experts in their area. When volunteers come, these experts lay aside their role to facilitate the work of others who know none of the above. Volunteers may be highly motivated and have a genuine burden for this field, but highly motivated untrained people often do more damage than good.¹⁴ Thus, missionaries end up herding volunteers around, hoping that the damage will be minimal to the work. Meanwhile, the trained professionals are not doing the work for which they were equipped.

Scientific Study on the Long-Term Effect of Short-Term Mission (Minneapolis: STEM Ministries, 1999), 14 (table 6).

¹¹David Blackney, “Avoiding the Pitfalls of Short-Term Missions: Counting the Costs & Getting Short-Term Missions Right” (PowerPoint) available at <http://www.mastersmission.org/Avoiding%20the%20Pitfalls%20of%20Short%20term%20for%20e-ssentials.ppt>; accessed 27 December 2007.

¹²Quoted by Camp, “The Great Commission.”

¹³Bill Waldrop, “Trends Affecting Mobilization of the North American Church,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 11 (July-August 1994): 118.

¹⁴Greg H. Parsons, “Equipping At-Home Mobilizers,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (July 1998): 285.

Volunteers create dependency.

Missionaries operate on the indigenous principle that precludes giving nationals money. Volunteers often operate out of guilt and the belief that all problems can be solved (or at least lubricated) by massive amounts of American dollars. They give money to nationals, creating resentment toward the career missionary, who has not been giving funds, and building dependency on the volunteer. This cavalier attitude toward giving destroys the national church's impetus to give, teaches nationals that Americans rather than God are their supply, and creates an unending cycle of dependency that cripples national work for decades.¹⁵

SOME SUGGESTIONS

Volunteerism seems to be a fad that will persist for some time. The International Mission Board and the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention must cooperate to ensure that maximum benefit comes both to the churches and to the Board. How can the Board and the churches work together to make volunteerism a complement to the core strategy of sending called, equipped, career missionaries to the ends of the earth?

Churches must take responsibility.

Churches that send mission teams out must accept the responsibility for their people. They need to insist that all volunteers be faithful, active members of the church; that they know the Bible and be people of prayer; that they witness regularly at home; and that they go through thorough preparation, including reading, training, and meeting together to form a cohesive team. Team members must be required to read books that teach missiological principles, and churches should work with the associations, state conventions, and seminaries to train volunteers in effective cross-cultural ministry.

Churches must work in partnership with missionaries on the ground, fit into their agenda, and insist that team members follow the rules or be sent home. They should apportion their financial resources to ensure that more monies go for career missions than for volunteer trips. They should also guard their resources to prevent people from taking annual trips at the expense of the church, the state convention, and the association simply because "they want to go." One way to accomplish this end would be to require those who go on successive trips to bear a greater portion of the cost each time, until they pay their entire way.

The International Mission Board should lead.

The IMB should lead in volunteer planning by providing appropriate trips to places where missionaries have effective strategies in place that can withstand the onslaught of volunteerism. They should partner with churches that work within IMB guidelines and

¹⁵Robert Reese, "Western Missions and Dependency," World Mission Associates, available at <http://www.wmausa.org/page.aspx?id=289947>; accessed 27 December 2007.

inform churches that show up unannounced that the missionary is not free to work with them. The Board should protect the missionary and the work, even if this could mean jeopardizing a relationship (but it couldn't be a strong relationship, or the team would have planned ahead).

Southern Baptists should develop a brief theology of missions that they can disseminate to churches and teams. This missiology should be clear, should define terms easily, and should be required reading before teams leave. A central tenet of IMB missiology—the priority of the career missionary—should be spelled out clearly so that volunteers understand the divide between those who travel overseas for a brief period and those who follow the call of God to live and work overseas.

The Board should provide a brief reading list for all volunteers, urge churches to plan ahead so that the team will have time to read, and reward churches that work within the structure. Further, the Board should ask churches for the names of all participants in volunteer trips and use these lists to develop appropriate ways to enlist career missionaries (such as hosting post-trip meetings, writing letters to challenge the participants, sending some type of e-zine that focuses on a “volunteer-to-career” push).

CONCLUSION

God's plan to disciple and perfect the nations is the local church. Incarnational missionaries lead nationals to Christ, start local churches, and train the leaders so are actively participating in His plan. Volunteers either fit into that plan and assist the work or come with their own agenda and hinder the work. When done well, volunteerism complements career missions by multiplying the efforts of the career missionary, providing critical skill sets for specific tasks, and bringing trained people alongside to further the work. When not done well, volunteerism hinders the work of missions in countless ways. Churches and mission agencies, and especially Southern Baptists, must work together to further the work of the kingdom and facilitate useful volunteerism that involves accountable stewardship of money, time, and talent.