

TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE IN SHORT TERM MISSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of short term missions has become a very relevant one for many local churches, and for the church staff and lay leaders that are engaged in planning and executing these projects. Thousands of lay people and church workers travel across the globe constantly to share their faith through different inter-cultural encounters and service projects. The phenomenon is really quite recent from an historical perspective, since only a very few practicing Christians could have imagined going on a missions trip before 1970. Today, however, many churches are now designating a significant part of their missions budget to sending church members out on missions trips to all sorts of places around the world. Many church members have spent significant portions of their vacation time doing Christian service in some global venue, and most if not all church members have at one time or another given to help their friends or others to go and to work on their behalf. For a growing number of Christians travel with a kingdom purpose has become habit-forming, so that they expect to take an annual missions trip much like planning their personal vacation.

The phenomenon has grown quickly so that missiological literature has scarcely been able to attempt precise definitions. Moreau, Corwin and McGee describe short term missions thus: “This usually refers to trips with a mission focus that range from one week to one to two years. They may be organized by churches, agencies, or even individuals for a variety of reasons (English-language camps, church building projects, evangelistic campaigns).”¹

In the 1960s and into the 1970s most denominational mission boards and missionary sending agencies were still sending out exclusively career personnel. While missionaries did come home for various reasons before retirement, there was always a sense of loss—almost of failure—and often some stigma attached. Few could have seen that there would be such a huge upsurge of interest in short term missions projects. In fact, there was strong resistance from old-timers who considered that the career missionary was the backbone for missionary endeavors, and that this fad of “vacations for Jesus” would subside quickly. They could not have been more wrong. For example, when Southern Baptists were developing goals for the Bold Mission Thrust they initiated in 1979, the most “out there” challenge was that by the year 2000 there would be at least 10,000 volunteers doing an overseas project each year. However, this was the one goal that was more than achieved—so that by the year 2000 there were over 30,000 Baptists on mission in overseas projects that the mission board could count! Only God knows how many really went. According to *Christianity Today*, “In 1979 an estimated 22,000 lay people in the United States were involved in overseas or cross-

¹Scott Moreau, Gary Corwin and Gary McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Books, 1993).

cultural ministries ranging from a few days to four years. A million now go forth annually, from 40,000 churches, agencies, and schools.”² Most recently, the tragic hurricanes along the Gulf Coast have highlighted the work of churches and Christian institutions in sending volunteer teams to help with various aspects of the reconstruction of the region. The cultural influence in recent times of short term missions trips can be seen in examples like the fact that after his missions trip to South Brazil well-known novelist John Grisham decided to pen a novel set in the region focusing on the work of missionaries there. The well-known book, *The Testament*, was the result.

In the last 25 years we have seen a sea change in attitudes in advancing short term missions. While the phrase “paradigm shift” has become overworked recently, lesser epithets would not capture the magnitude of the changes that have taken place. At one time most missions-minded churches would send a very few of their finest young men and women out as missionaries, pray for them while they were gone, and give to support their work. Now the church that does not sponsor some significant missions trips or hands-on experiences for its members is perceived as somehow behind the curve.

Denominational mission boards began to report as early as the 1980s that an increasing percentage of their missionary candidates received their call into missions while on a short term missionary experience. For this reason, the attitudes began to shift and missionaries began to pay close attention to short term missions experiences as recruiting tools for new missionaries. Now, missionary sending agencies like the IMB would note a significant shift in the composition of their missionaries on the field, since by the year 2000 the short-termers (staying for two to three years or less) had actually begun to outnumber the career personnel with longevity of service.

We have also seen the rise of countless new organizations whose mission is to help churches plan and execute good missions trips. Organizations like YWAM and Campus Crusade were among the early adopters of a strategy for short-term missions that utilized large numbers of energetic but largely inexperienced young people to pursue the global goals of their organizations. Frontier Missions is an organization with a fervent commitment to short term missions at the outset of its 25 year history. Its founder, Greg Livingstone, had enjoyed success in mobilizing the young generation to work sacrificially among North African Muslims: “Livingstone believed that young, teachable, relatively inexperienced believers could help launch fellowships of Muslim-born believers” Frontiers was started to give shape to that vision since the agency he worked for did not agree with that strategy.³

By any measure, the rapid growth of short term missions is one of the most defining trends of the last twenty-five years of missionary work. A recent article in USA Today highlights the extent to which US churches have embraced short term missions. It states: “Short-term mission trips (less than two weeks) are enjoying a wave of popularity with

²Ken Walker and Sarah Page, “Agencies Announce Short Term Missions Standards,” *Christianity Today*, 47.10 (Oct., 2003).

³“Celebrating 25 Years of Frontiers Ministry,” *Frontiers Frontlines* (Spring, 2007): 8.

Americans eager to put faith into action and make vacations meaningful. About 1.6 million Americans took such trips abroad last year, according to a survey by Robert Wuthnow, Princeton University sociologist of religion. Domestic trips, which peak in the summer, are even more popular.”⁴ The short term missions trip is now part of the cultural landscape of North American church life. Evidence of this is seen in the simple fact that a Google search on the phrase “short term missions trip” yields 1,070,000 hits!

Short term missions has come to designate in popular parlance two quite distinct, but related phenomena. One of them relates to the longevity of missionary service. Traditionally, missionaries were seen as taking up a lifetime calling. For most of the Modern Missionary Movement the idea of becoming a missionary was to mimic the experience of William Carey who left England for India to incarnate the gospel there. He never returned and his grave site is just outside Calcutta where he worked. The William Carey way of doing missions for all a lifetime has only recently given way to an army of energetic young Christians who will give two or three years of service overseas—usually immediately after completing college. Some of these will decide to return and develop a career of international ministry. Most of them will finish their term of service and integrate back into life in the USA, and carry the insights of their experience into the work they will do in their churches. However, a growing group of senior citizens have chosen to use the energies of their retirement years doing international work, and they have created another significant group of two to three year servants abroad.

The other phenomenon is that the “missions trip” has become a staple for church life in many, if not most US churches of any size. These trips can range in time commitment from a few days to a semester abroad in God’s service for students. An incredible number of people have chosen to dedicate their vacations to doing some kind of international service project, and others find ways to “get off work” to participate in such efforts by their churches.

One of the reasons to draw the distinction is that the two year commitment generally involves application to a missionary sending agency of some sort and/or raising monthly support. Those who go on a missions trip generally pay their own way or solicit one time contributions from friends and family to cover the costs of their efforts. Also, there is a fundamental difference in the way that one can engage another culture and come to understand how to work within it when there is a longer commitment than a few weeks.⁵

⁴USA Today, 19 June 2006. Section Life, 6D.

⁵To adapt to a culture in terms of learning to live and work effectively in it, is typically considered to be a process that requires about two years—though it is difficult to quantify this precisely or to determine at what specific point in the gradual process towards cultural integration a person actually becomes truly effective. See Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985) 69-89. In this chapter on “Cultural Differences and the New Missionary” Hiebert traces the process of adaptation through culture shock. See also the more recent treatments by Brooks Peterson, *Cultural Intelligence: A Guide to Working with People From Other Cultures* (Boston, MA:

Somewhere in between these “categories” is the experience of college students who do a semester or summer abroad with a missionary purpose. This would suggest that there is more of a continuum on which we can describe differences in missionary experiences than any kind of rigid categorization. In fact, there is so much experimentation and innovation happening that it is still difficult to create any kind of iron clad categories in this sort of work.

A PERSONAL PILGRIMAGE

Short term missions has played a key role in my own experience. In fact, it was decisive as a motivator for getting me started in missions. My own life was redirected in a significant way when God took my wife and me to Romania and Yugoslavia in the summer of 1975. The region was still behind the Iron Curtain, ruled by Communist dictators. On that trip I spent three days in a small room with five young lay preachers who battled persecution in Romania bravely and whose curiosity about the Bible and Christian faith had no bounds. Their spiritual hunger convinced me that a growing church needed the steady guidance of healthy teaching or “sound doctrine” in order to sustain its growth. For me, the challenges of making disciples overseas in cross-cultural environments was infinitely more complex and stimulating than re--hashing theological arguments already rehearsed by many others in the USA. In short, God called me to be a missionary. This decision redirected my life. Rather than racing for the most prestigious pulpit I could find, I found myself studying for a doctorate in New Testament and Early Church in order to use these insights to prepare workers to lead the church in other parts of the world. My mission now was not so much “to preach the gospel” myself as it was to prepare and to coach those who would preach and lead the church. My life would be worthwhile if their efforts would bring many others to Christ. Therefore, let me cast my lot with those who believe strongly in the value of short term missions.

DIVERSITY OF METHODS—UNITY OF PURPOSE

The precise focus of missions trips runs across a wide spectrum of creative activities. Some focus on sports, on disaster relief, on cultural interchange, on AIDS prevention, on work with orphans, on agricultural assistance, on many forms of community development, on teaching courses to local Christians, on simple relationship building, on prayer-walking, on scripture distribution or on direct evangelism, or even on a building project. The list could go on and on. The only limit to the different kinds of trips with different kinds of purposes is the creativity of the planners in determining strategies to engage one aspect or another of the local society at the trip’s destination. One of my favorites was a team that went recently as solar oven engineers in Afghanistan—if for no other reason than it underscores that almost any activity imaginable could be potentially used in short term missions.

Realities on the ground should play a key role in determining the specific work of the trip. One would expect for there to be significant differences in what work might be done in

Intercultural Press, 2004) as well as David C. Thomas and Kerr Inkson, *Cultural Intelligence: People Skills for Global Business* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003).

a major city, and out in the open countryside. Or, again that work in a hospitable environment politically such as a Canadian city would contrast sharply with what might be done in a restricted-access setting. The religion and culture of the people to whom the service of the group is directed will play a role. Especially in the Islamic world, group members will need to change their dress, their demeanor, and their methods.

All of these trips will appeal to those wanting to help local people experience one aspect or another of the way Christianity can impact their lives. However, strategies will change according to whether the project seeks to sow gospel seed, to harvest new believers, to develop new churches, to disciple new believers, or to develop and train leaders for the new churches. A good many projects will focus on the society at large and ask how to add value into the lives of people there. In many cases the missions project will actually focus on assisting across the many domains of society on improving quality of life in one dimension or another. This pre-evangelism can be a powerful tool for relationship building where gospel witness is given. So, these few examples should suffice to affirm that short term missions projects come in all shapes and sizes.

BASIC TIPS AND TRICKS FOR A GOOD MISSIONS TRIP

The literature that is referenced in the resource list attached contains a number of manuals that give specific guidance on the planning and execution of a missions trip. These include such valuable helps as timelines, coaching on fund raising for participants, suggested orientation programs, and even sample packing lists. Those works can be consulted by leaders of missions project teams. However, what follows is a list of essential general issues that must be managed well for a missions trip to achieve good results.

- Ask the local missionaries or a local church to help your group develop a project that will fit into an existing strategy of work, so that your efforts will not be a one-time shot. That way there will be people on the ground to follow up with what you achieve.
- Work with a trusted partner on site at your destination. The key to a successful trip is having locals who can guide you past cultural landmines and through to productive cultural engagement and service.
- Integrate prayer explicitly and consciously into every aspect of what you do. Ask God to guide you and to bless you and to use you as His instruments in the lives of those with whom you come into contact.
- Get the travel documentation right. Every participant must have a valid passport and the appropriate visas. All recommended immunizations must be done far in advance of the travel date. Flight arrangements, lodging, local transportation, and food are essential items that must be planned and budgeted for.
- Do careful orientation with your group. This allows you to do homework on the culture collectively in a shared way and team building that will prove useful while on the road.

- Help your participants to develop a group of prayer supporters, some of whom will also be financial contributors to help with the trip expenses. Getting a list of prayer partners, contacting potential donors, explaining what you hope to achieve and reporting what the trip accomplished is a large part of the experience.
- Coach your group on how to be culturally appropriate in sharing their faith in the local culture you will visit. It is always fitting to be a witness for Jesus—but there are ways and there are ways . . .
- Plan to be tourists while you are there. Do your work, use your service projects to make friends in the local culture, but since you are visiting a new place in the world for the first time, allow yourselves to be normal enough to enjoy some time learning about the place you are visiting. I like a half-day tour upon arrival and then to the work. Then, a couple of days for tourism and shopping at the end allows you to disengage from the ministry and do some important debriefing before you get on the plane.
- Plan your travel carefully. After all, this is a “trip!” A mistake on getting good flight reservations so that the group gets split apart in route, or a bad choice of hotel accommodations can make the entire trip difficult.
- Know the safety and health issues before you go. Learn what you need to be careful of. Getting robbed (or worse) will create a very negative experience. Eating at the wrong place and getting diarrhea will be memorable, but your group will not be effective.
- Plan on returning next year. Long term partnerships with repeated trips will yield far greater results in terms of ministry into the local culture, and open the possibility of developing deep relationships.

Certainly there are a great many other suggestions that could be passed along, but these are some key essentials to bear in mind.

SOME OBJECTIONS TO SHORT TERM MISSIONS

Popular as they are, critics say, short-term missions trips can be counterproductive -- or worse. Concerns surface especially with international trips. USA Today notes some of the nay-sayings:

Judd Birdsall, former managing editor of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, a Christian journal, grew up in Japan in an evangelical missionary home. Too often these days, he says, untrained *short-term* missionaries -- or "vacationaries" -- offend indigenous populations and undermine hard-earned relationships cultivated by long-*term* missionaries over many years.

"At this point, it really is an out-of-control phenomenon," Birdsall says. "Americans come in with good intentions, but they couple zeal with ignorance, and that can be a deadly combination for the folks who are on the ground slogging it out year after year."

All too often, groups set off with scant foreign-language skills and minimal cross-cultural training, says David Livermore, author of *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*. Their construction projects sometimes take work away from locals or come at the expense of more pressing needs, Livermore says, but impoverished hosts dare not protest.

"Often there's too high a price for them to say no to this because often (hosting a group) is the means to getting the check that will help support them."

Volunteers also run the risk of duplicating efforts in today's decentralized *mission* environment, says Mark Oestreicher of Youth Specialties, an El Cajon, Calif.-based training firm for church youth leaders. One slum in Tijuana, Mexico, for example, now expects regular visits from *mission*-driven groups from Southern California.

"Each of these groups will come in, do a vacation Bible school and lead the same kids to Christ over and over again," Oestreicher says.

Others concede that the trips aren't perfect but say they do a lot of good. Dana Robert of the Center for Global Christianity and *Mission* at Boston University points to improved standards of living and broadened perspectives of those who travel, interact and serve.

"A lot of people come back from these trips humbled," Robert says. "I think, on balance, it's more worthwhile than not."⁶

Most missionaries have some horror stories to tell about culturally insensitive participants on missions trips who deeply offend local Christians and/or community members in ways that are really harmful. There would be value in adopting a missiological version of the Hippocratic Oath to "Do no harm." However, in practice this means a high commitment to understanding local, customs, practices, values and folkways. It requires a strong dose of humility, and eagerness to be a cultural learner and to avoid monocultural assumptions of the "Ugly American" syndrome. This unconscious cultural chauvinism and arrogance makes international relations difficult in many places around the world.

To be sure there are also horror stories about short term missionaries getting trapped unwittingly in cross-cultural misunderstandings, where unintentionally their words and actions raise expectations among local people that are contrary to what could have been intended. Most of these are quite inconvenient, but manageable.

⁶ USA Today, 19 June 2006. Section Life, 6D.

There are also many horror stories about well-intentioned benevolence being taken advantage of or having long-term debilitating consequences. One of the first articles of missiology that short term missionary participants must understand clearly are the practices required by Henry Venn's formula for an indigenous church. Anything that is done that does not make the church self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating will have negative, and sometimes disastrous consequences in the long run. This reality has lead to some attempts to create "standards" for short-term missionaries. These doubtless serve a helpful function in preparing attitudes of missions trips participants. A good example of a statement of standards for short term missions is to be found attached in Appendix 1.

Finally, one must ask about the long term effects of repeated missions trips. These can be very good in some instances, such as in response to the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in Guatemala and Honduras a few years ago. Along the US Gulf Coast and in New Orleans, Texas Baptist Men and other disaster relief teams have been wonderful ambassadors for Southern Baptists as they have selflessly served the community in an hour of disaster and need.

Sometimes, the long term effects can actually backfire. For example, after 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall US Christians of all sizes and varieties rushed into the spiritual void behind the Iron Curtain. Romania, which in 1975 under severe Communist oppression had the highest level of church growth for Baptists in the world, found that freedom was far more difficult to deal with. After an initial surge, where in the early days churches were literally overrun by curious visitors, by the mid-1990s growth among Baptists there had stalled out into a flat line of stagnation. One of the major contributing factors was an obsession among local pastors there with finding potential donors among the many missions teams who visited them to finance the building of new church sanctuaries. You could argue that they took their eyes off the ball and ceased to focus first and foremost on the needs of the lost people around them. However, the blame should be mainly ascribed to well-intentioned but often thoughtless attempts by US Christians to "do something" to help out in ways that were not always missiologically smart.

Christians in much of the former Soviet Union were overwhelmed by a tidal wave of volunteers that was totally uncoordinated, but who often offered help that conflicted with other one another. In 1999 I attended the annual meeting of the Ukrainian Baptist Convention. There was a luncheon on the second day of all the groups who were sending volunteers to work in their churches. There were over 200 representatives of 112 different entities present.

A similar situation may soon exist in Cuba. There has been really phenomenal growth among evangelical churches there, in spite of many repressive measures by Castro's regime. Nevertheless, as freedom to travel becomes widespread, church leaders there predict that they will be overwhelmed by a tidal wave of well meaning US Christians, anxious to be a part of what God is doing there. They will bring all the techniques and mechanisms from our churches, that on the whole are not growing, and confidently recommend them to the polite and hospitable Cubans whose churches are doing quite well without them. God save them!

SOME POSITIVE BENEFITS OF SHORT TERM MISSIONS

The article on “Short Term Missions” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* describes the benefits of short term missions in the following terms:

The short term missions movement has definitely been a key factor in the mobilization of world mission globally. The present generation of missionary candidates tends to make their decisions and commitments base on the knowledge gained through firsthand experience. As a result of short-term service a world vision can be developed that in turn affects the mobilization efforts of the church at large. In addition, many feel that short-term missions provides a valuable respite for career missionaries, brings fresh enthusiasm from the outside, and accomplished practical projects as well as significant ministry. Obviously, many who serve in short-term missions are likely candidates for long-term service, and in fact, a significant number of career missionaries today have had a short-term mission experience. Those who return without making a commitment to long-term service are able to impact the churches that they are a part of with a global awareness and an expanded vision of God’s work in the world.⁷

One of the best presented arguments for short term missions is found in a brief, 39 page, booklet by STM which provides documentation that participants in short term missions projects experience statistically significant changes in prayer, giving and commitment to missions.⁸ More such research is needed to demonstrate that missions trips do produce a significant shift in missionary mindset and commitment levels.

In an article entitled, “Getting Past My Selfishness” we hear this testimony of the positive effect of a missions trip by a participant:

I have sort of a love-hate relationship with *missions trips*. I've been on several—to Estonia and the Dominican Republic, not to mention homeless shelters and rehab centers here in the States—and I always go through the same cycle of thinking.

I start out with something like a sense of dread, because these things are physically and emotionally demanding. *Missions trips* are a pretty selfless thing, and I'm a very selfish person.

But I do them anyway, because I feel like God calls me to. And every time I do, I've been blessed. As much as I might gripe beforehand, when it's all over, I have no

⁷Dennis Massaro, “Short Term Missions,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Books, 2000), 874.

⁸*Is Short Term Missions Really Worth the Time and Money? Advancing God's Kingdom Through Short Term Missions* (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publishing, 1994); available from www.worldvisionresources.com.

regrets. Why? Because I've seen God's hand time and again, all around the world—even through my own selfishness.

Like that time in Estonia. We'd just arrived after 20 hours of travel, and the airline had lost our luggage. I was hot, sweaty, stinky—and ticked. But they'd scheduled a little concert that night in the town square.

So I go out there, still angry, and I start singing. A woman approaches me. She's dirty and smelly, and her breath reeks of alcohol. I'm totally repulsed by her, but she puts her hands on my face, kisses my cheek and says something in Russian. I just wanted her to go away.

Somebody later translated the woman's words for me: "My daughter," she was saying. "You look like my daughter. You have the face of an angel. I love you, I love you."

And then the words of Jesus hit me right between the eyes: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). I hadn't thought of that Scripture in ages. But there it was, staring me in the face—touching me, kissing me, speaking to me in a language I couldn't understand.

It was as if I had been touched on the face by God. It was like he was saying, "I'm just as much a part of this woman as I'm a part of you." I'll never forget it.⁹

Sue Lennarson calls her experiences on missions trips "a powerful education" and ends her testimonies with the exhortation: "I encourage congregational leaders to look at offering opportunities for serving that take people around the world. Step into a different culture, language, and way of life. Listen to all that God has to teach through God's people in these places."¹⁰

Not all of the take home value of short term missions trips is necessarily positive. Some students who go on trips experience an exhilarating sense of God's presence, and are astonished by the faithfulness of local Christians they meet and find their own lives challenged to embrace similar commitments. As healthy as this is, it can spawn a sense of disillusionment, even anger towards the church back home. Perhaps there is nothing at all wrong with learning by contact with Christians from other parts of the world that there are areas in which our own beliefs and practices may be substandard. However, it will be important to learn how to direct these negative feelings in a positive way.¹¹

⁹Jennifer Knapp, "Getting Past My Selfishness," *Campus Life*, 60.6 (Jan., 2002).

¹⁰Sue Lennarson, "To All Nations: Continuing Education on the Move." *The Clergy Journal*, (Oct., 2004): 19-20.

¹¹Sherry M. Mallin, Cynthia B. Eriksson, Katherine J. Meese, Antonia Civica and Deborah Gorton with David W. Foy, "Cultural Identity and Re-entry in Short-Term Student

Descriptions of a new camaraderie with those on the trip, and an intense appreciation for life abound on missions trips. Take for example the poetic sense of immediacy in this description of a missions trip to Brazil in Christianity Today:

A BLOOD-RED MOON rises slowly into the black sky above the Amazon jungle. The low rumble of a riverboat's engine and the clatter of birds in the distant trees break the silence.

The Southern Cross hangs above us as we make our way up the Rio Negro, the largest tributary of the Amazon, the world's largest river system. This water highway provides a *missions* team of 25 American and Brazilian Christians an avenue to reach the small communities clustered along the shore. I am here to witness and record the journey.

About half of those aboard are medical professionals and boat crew. Among the others are a youth leader, the president of an airline company, and a contractor with his son. Some have been on this river before. Most have not. They are getting to know each other for the first time. But just 24 hours into the *trip*, there is a warmth and camaraderie despite the tight quarters. Their goal is to bring villagers a message of God's hope, along with urgent medical care. As they cruise through wide, dark waters and the vast rain forest, their sense of purpose as a team grows stronger.

There are an estimated 33,000 villages in the Amazon basin. Shallow-draft riverboats provide one of the few ways to reach these villages, most of which have fewer than 100 people.¹²

It is to be hoped that the reader will notice that all of the eulogizing about the value of missions trips in reality speaks to the way that the lives of those going on the trips are blessed and enriched. However, our motives for going at least begin with the presupposition that all the travel, fuss and bother are to help the people of the host culture that will receive the missions team.

One of the really important pieces of research that the present reality demands is a careful study that would survey those who are on the receiving end of our short term missionary endeavors to determine to what extent they share our enthusiasm for what we have done among them. One of the really beneficial aspects of short term missions is that it creates friendships across cultures and languages and geography and promotes mutual understanding. This factor should be measured, along with others dynamics that we need to

Missionaries," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 34.2 (2006): 153-164. This interesting study is one of the very few attempts to use any kind of quantitative analysis or scientific method in discerning the change in attitudes that going on a missions trip will cause. While all of their conclusions are not convincing, their method points the way to an area of research that begs to be explored by missiology.

¹²Gary Gnidovic, "River Deep Mercy Wide." *Christianity Today*, 48.2 (Feb., 2004).

have measured, such as whether the local churches prosper when the team leaves, or whether the people in the area are more receptive to the gospel as a result of their visit.

IS SHORT TERM MISSIONS US BASED?

Without any doubt there are cultural factors in the US which are contributors to the recent and exponential growth of short term missions. Some of the factors are:

- Global travel has become more affordable. Only a generation ago it was common to speak of the “jet-setters” who represented the richest of the rich. Now travel to global destinations is affordable to the middle class, and they are traveling! At present 10% of the Gross Domestic Product in the USA is dedicated to the Transportation industry—Americans spend more on personal travel than we do on food!
- Attitudes toward world travel have shifted significantly. When the baby boomers were in school they still considered it somewhat exotic to need a passport. However, 40% of Gen Xers stated in a 1999 survey that they expected to live and work outside the USA for 3 to 5 years of their lives. University curriculum has shifted accordingly, so that it is now a commonplace for most students to arrive on campus as freshmen expecting to spend a semester abroad. For those students who have a high level of Christian commitment there will be a desire to integrate their Christian faith into this global experience.
- Globalization is a primary and driving factor in the new world order. The internet and electronic communications have opened communications possibilities between people of different cultures in ways that reach far beyond even the global diffusion of the mass media that characterized the last generation. Now, as Thomas Friedman has aptly noted, *The World Is Flat*, so that it is possible to interact, to conduct business, and to exert influence from anywhere to everywhere. Proof of this is found in that when the Hong Kong Stock Exchange sneezes, Wall Street catches a cold. Likewise, the USA finds itself fighting a war 10 time zones away in order to keep terrorists from attacking us at home. Quite often one receives email replies from across the globe more quickly than one can confirm with a colleague across the hall whether to go get coffee together.
- The success of Mormon missionary efforts? While it is painful to bring up for most evangelicals, who still consider Mormon beliefs to represent a dangerous and sectarian form of Christian heresy, imitation is the most sincere form of flattery. Could it be that here is a group who does all the right things for all the wrong reasons? There has been a remarkable expansion of Mormonism, due to the activity of energetic young men who wear white shirts, ties, and name tags with the preposterous designation “elder.” The inter-cultural exposure of these young people has had an unintentional enriching effect in the Mormon community. Certainly in the Salt Lake Olympics it was obvious that there were translators available for almost every language of the world from among local Mormons.

- Volunteerism is on the rise in US society. It has become a social value for people to serve their community in tangible ways. Schools are promoting service projects, and even developing courses on “service learning.” The Peace Corp has enjoyed popularity for this reason. Habitat for Humanity and World Vision have mobilized large numbers of people to help on projects that are concrete and focused and that do some good thing for other people in a tangible way. This new “hands on” approach and mindset towards charity also influences the work of missions in churches.

Most of the treatment here makes the tacit assumption that the short term missionaries go out from the USA as the sending nation to other nations. That would be true for US churches, but increasingly there we must recognize that missions is not driven by people from one nation, or region of the world.

Many US Christians are surprised to learn that Korea is now the leading sender of missionaries around the world.¹³ In the same way it may be that China will be the chief provider of missionaries in the 21st century.¹⁴ Clearly the center of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the south and to the east, so that nations that were previously seen as missions fields are now serving as missions bases.¹⁵ Some of the most promising developments are to learn how short term missions has been adopted by Christians of other lands who are pursuing a careful missionary strategy as they travel and work around the world. There are even US based groups, like International Commission, whose focus is beginning to shift from promoting US short term missions abroad to including a strategy of promoting church to church partnerships in evangelistic activities among Latin Americans and other non-USA groups. In fact, one of the most promising strategies for missions in the 21st century will focus on the potential role of internationals, immigrants and ex-patriot new believers and churches who can return to the unreached people groups who share their ethnic origins.

American Christians who do short term missions will need to drop their “attitude” as they work around the world. It should be a part of project orientation to challenge American Christians to jettison their own cultural chauvinism and unconscious air of assumed superiority. If short term missions is to reap positive benefits, those who go must be conscious that their purpose is to promote the kingdom of God and the reign of Christ in the hearts of all people rather than the “American Way.” While they cannot nor should they try to repress their cultural identity as Americans, they can have sufficient humility to learn

¹³Rob Moll, “Missions incredible: South Korea sends more missionaries than any country but the U.S. And it won’t be long before it’s number one.” *Christianity Today*, 50.3 (March 2006): 28-34.

¹⁴Justin Long, “Why the Chinese church could be the greatest sending force of the 21st century,” Reality Check Email, July 21, 2004; cf. <http://www.strategicnetwork.org>.

¹⁵Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). cf. Timothy Yates, ed., *Mission and the Next Christendom*. (Sheffield, UK: Cliff College Publishing, 2005).

from others and seek to find how God is at work in new environments. The ultimate goal of all short term missions should be to make new friendships, in which we can share incarnationally how knowing Christ can enrich our lives in the present and determine our eternal destiny.

One good way to avoid this flawed sense of “one-way” missions on short term projects is to establish “partnerships” with mutual give and take with churches in a specific location, or among a certain people group or population segment. Partnerships embrace cooperation and provide ample opportunities for both traveling and receiving visitors.¹⁶ This allows churches and Christian institutions to develop overseas partners with kindred spirits to work together on areas of mutual interest. Also, a growing edge of missions that has yet to be really explored is the role that immigrant groups who are exposed to the gospel in a new environment, such as living as internationals in the USA, can play in taking their new appreciation of the gospel back to their kinsmen in their own homeland.¹⁷

Finally, another area for partnerships is the conscious formation of multi-cultural teams. Dallas Baptist University participated in a missions project to promote AIDS prevention among high school students in Swaziland in the summer of 2004. Teams of 10-12 students were formed to go to each high school that were an equal mix of DBU students from the USA, students on their missions year from the Scripture Union organization founded by Andrew Murray in South Africa, and Swazi students who were leaders in their own local churches. It made a very vivid impact upon Swazi high school students to observe the multicultural nature of the teams and their unity in professing that the only really effective means of stopping the AIDS epidemic was for God to help students practice sexual abstinence until marriage and strict faithfulness to their marriage partners.

NEW CHALLENGE: MISSIOLOGY FOR THE MASSES

When people do missions, then the people must learn missiology. Having the rank and file of church members engaging directly in hand-on encounters with ministry all around the globe simply challenges missiologists and theological educators to assist them in getting the tools necessary for their work. The Argentine President, Domingo F. Sarmiento, who is credited with founding public education in that nation is often quoted as saying: “If the people is sovereign, you must educate the sovereign.” By that he meant that a democratization of the education that was formerly reserved for princes was necessary, and that the common man who casts his ballot would necessarily need to understand the various domains of society and affairs of state. In the same way, one might apply this same dynamic to short term missions. In an earlier time, where it could be complained that missions was the “fad of the few” it made sense to give specific instruction on cross-cultural dynamics only to those who were heading overseas for service. However, with churches mobilizing all

¹⁶cf. Phill Butler, *Well Connected: How to Release Power and Restore Hope Through Kingdom Partnerships* (Monrovia, CA: MARC Publications of World Vision, 2006).

¹⁷In 2004 the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology considered global migration patterns and looked at the theme: “Collaboration: The Missing Link in the World Christian Mission.”

of their members to do missions projects the “need to know” has expanded exponentially. This presents an important new challenge to missiologists. I would adapt the old statement of Sarmiento to short term missions by saying: “If the whole church will be on mission with God, then the whole church must study missiology.” Fortunately, orientation and debriefing for trips and the vivid experience out on the field provide wonderful teachable moments where Christians will be struggling with how best to contextualize their words, actions and attitudes in seeking to reach people of other cultures. Missiologists must now step up to the plate and be ready to teach their discipline to a rapidly expanding audience.

The issue of learning on missions trips how the gospel interfaces with different cultural realities is posed by Paul Jeffrey, A United Methodist Missionary living in Honduras:

As part of their experience, volunteers must wrestle with the questions of today's poor. One of the major tasks facing the U.S. church today is giving folks the tools with which to process and interpret their firsthand encounters with economic and racial disparities that characterize our hemisphere. We need curriculum that will prepare work teams for their trip theologically and culturally, and guide them through a process of discerning changes in their lives after they return.¹⁸

Likewise, Dennis Massaro calls for careful preparation of mission trip participants, and help debriefing them before they return home:

Clear communication channels should be established with churches, nationals and missionaries on the field in order to clarify expectations. Thorough preparation for those on the field, as well as the short-term workers, is essential. A clear understanding developed through training in the areas of spiritual formation, cultural issues, and interpersonal dynamics is necessary. Short term workers should also understand the biblical basis of their service. Realistic expectations for the short-term worker must be explored. Those expectations should assume a posture of learning and a desire to serve with the national leaders and career missionaries in a supportive partnership. One of the most important dimensions of any short-term mission is careful reflection at the end of the experience. Short-term workers must debrief and process their experience so that they can be responsible with what they have been allowed to experience. This will not only enable short-term workers to understand their mission experience better, but it will allow them to communicate their vision to others.¹⁹

The work of the IMB in recent years to develop training institutes for volunteer team leaders is an excellent model of the kind of work that needs to be done in a concentrated way in our churches and among Christian institutions in the near future. This is a fertile field for budding missiologists to ply their wares.

¹⁸*Christian Century*, December 12, 2001, 118.34.

¹⁹Dennis Massaro, “Short Term Missions,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*, ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic Books, 2000), 874.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Short term missions is a significant present reality and that it is here to stay. However, there is so much innovation and experimentation that it may be that churches have yet to really discover how to get the best strategic results out of sending their members to the ends of the earth.

One could hope that US Christians will soon tire of simply doing “globe-trotting for Jesus” and serving as “vacationaries” by simply working to stick pins in maps on church bulletin boards of how many areas they have visited, however briefly. There are groups that are seeking to use volunteers as the integral, or perhaps organizing part, of a coordinated strategy among a specific people group or population segment. This is a growing edge where we can think carefully about how to maximize the kingdom benefits of the enthusiastic and altruistic work of a great many Christians.

One of my favorite new approaches is an astonishing new effort to engaging medium-sized unreached people groups by having small groups that are part of the Saddleback Community Church in California, pastored by Rick Warren. Curtis Sergeant, who served in Asia and helped to develop the Strategy Coordinator Training used by the IMB as a part of his DMin Project under my supervision here at Southwestern, is leading this effort. He felt so strongly about the new strategic possibilities of challenging and mobilizing small groups to adopt and to engage a people that he left a position with the IMB as a vice president. This is a program that is breaking ground in a whole new area. While by prior agreement, the efforts of Rick Warren and his wife to combat AIDS in Africa will have a great deal more press coverage, it may well be that the UPG work will have more consequence in terms of the global expansion of Christianity in our generation.

Another new approach is being developed here in the DFW metroplex by pastor Bob Roberts and the Northwood Church in Keller. This church was planted just over 20 years ago and has planted 85 other churches to date. A group of 15 church planting interns is working at the church for a year of training this year and will soon leave to launch their new church starts. A web-based network of church planters with a global vision unites on the Glocal Net sponsored by the church. Twelve years ago Bob Roberts visited Hanoi, Vietnam and has led his church to adopt that city and country in a partnership. Over 100 church members visit Vietnam annually in 4 or 5 different trips—each with its own project assignment. The church also helps with projects in Puebla, Mexico and Belize. What is interesting is that under Bob Roberts’ leadership the church has adopted a different view of what it means to be a church member—it is expected of members that they will find a way to be actively engaged at the global level, as well as the local level. Roberts’ view is that churches, at least, need to be open and honest about their identity even in resistant areas, and that if they engage the whole culture across all of the domains of society and find ways to add value to the lives of the people there that one can trust that these actions will open the door for direct personal witness and recommend the gospel to the people of that area. Bob Roberts has a contract with Zondervan to publish four new books that lay out his philosophy, the first two are now in print and the third is ready to send to the publisher. I highly recommend reading *Transformation: How Glocal Churches Transform Lives and Change the*

World²⁰ and *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Serve a Flat World*.²¹ These and other encouraging new initiatives point to the possibility of using short term missions volunteers in new and more vitally productive ways in the future.

CONCLUSION

One thing at least is certain. We live in days when God's kingdom is coming and his will is being done on earth in surprising new ways that only heaven could inspire. There are new winds of the Spirit blowing across the globe, and one can anticipate that what we are describing here as new will very soon seem old and antiquated in understanding. We are living in a time of upheaval and rapid change, so that very soon we may see that short term missions has carried us much closer to the unimagined realizations of the dream contained in the watchword of the old 1910 Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland—"Whole Gospel, Whole Church, Whole World."

APPENDIX 1 STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE IN SHORT TERM MISSION

THE NATIONALLY-DERIVED STANDARDS

1. God-Centeredness

An excellent short-term mission seeks first God's glory and his kingdom, and is expressed through our:

- 1.1 **Purpose** — Centering on God's glory and his ends throughout our entire STM process
- 1.2 **Lives** — Sound biblical doctrine, persistent prayer, and godliness in all our thoughts, words, and deeds
- 1.3 **Methods** — Wise, biblical, and culturally-appropriate methods which bear spiritual fruit

2. Empowering Partnerships

An excellent short-term mission establishes healthy, interdependent, on-going relationships between sending and receiving partners, and is expressed by:

- 2.1 Primary focus on intended receptors
- 2.2 Plans which benefit all participants
- 2.3 Mutual trust and accountability

3. Mutual Design

An excellent short-term mission collaboratively plans each specific outreach

²⁰ Bob Roberts, *Transformation: How Glocal Churches Transform Lives and Change the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

²¹Bob Roberts, *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Serve in a Flat World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

for the benefit of all participants, and is expressed by:

- 3.1 On-field methods and activities aligned to long-term strategies of the partnership
- 3.2 Goer-guests' ability to implement their part of the plan
- 3.3 Host receivers' ability to implement their part of the plan

4. **Comprehensive Administration**

An excellent short-term mission exhibits integrity through reliable set-up and thorough administration for all participants, and is expressed by:

- 4.1 Truthfulness in promotion, finances, and reporting results
- 4.2 Appropriate risk management
- 4.3 Quality program delivery and support logistics

5. **Qualified Leadership**

An excellent short-term mission screens, trains, and develops capable leadership for all participants, and is expressed by:

- 5.1 **Character** — Spiritually mature servant leadership
- 5.2 **Skills** — Prepared, competent, organized and accountable leadership
- 5.3 **Values** — Empowering and equipping leadership

6. **Appropriate Training**

An excellent short-term mission prepares and equips all participants for the mutually designed outreach, and is expressed by:

- 6.1 Biblical, appropriate, and timely training
- 6.2 On-going training and equipping (pre-field, on-field, post-field)
- 6.3 Qualified trainers

7. **Thorough Follow-Up**

An excellent short-term mission assures debriefing and appropriate follow-up for all participants, and is expressed by:

- 7.1 Comprehensive debriefing (pre-field, on-field, post-field)
- 7.2 On-field re-entry preparation
- 7.3 Post-field follow-up and evaluation

From <http://www.stmstandards.org/standards-overview.php>