

What a Mission Executive Would Like Those Involved in Short-term Missions to Know.

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Abstract: The growth of "short term missions" has presented us with both opportunities and challenges. There is no doubt that short term missions has had a positive impact in many ways. The spiritual lives of participants have been enlivened and renewed by the opportunity to interact with Christians from other nations, languages and cultures. Their eyes have been opened to new realities of life in this world. Examples of commitment and perseverance on the part of local Christians have often been an inspiration. This interchange has gone both ways, as local Christians, too, are inspired and encouraged by those willing to give of their time and resources to walk side-by-side with them. From the perspective of a missions executive working with an agency that promotes also long-term mission work, a missions executive feels that there are some things that the short-term missionary should take into consideration so that her or his experience would be as positive as possible, especially as it relates to the expansion of God's kingdom.

A Personal Pilgrimage

When I received the invitation to participate in this conference, Dr. Priest indicated that not only was he looking for papers on research that has been done, but also that he would like to hear from practitioners who could relay something of their experience on the field. I have not done any systematic research on the topic of “short-term” missions or their impact.¹ What I have to say is based on twenty-two years of experience in missions, primarily in Latin America, first as an evangelistic missionary in Guatemala, then as mission team leader there. Since 1997 I have served my denominational mission board as regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean, and since 2000, as the supervisor of the Ph.D. in Missiology program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. I would say that this last experience, as supervisor of the Ph.D. program, has contributed greatly to my understanding and the formation of my attitudes toward short-term missions.

First, let me say that for our purposes right now, I will have in mind by “short-term” missions, mainly the sending mission teams to mission sites for periods of one to four weeks. Our own denomination defines short term missions as anything less than six months on the mission field.

When we first went to Guatemala in 1983, the concept of short-term missions was simply not an issue for our denomination—there just weren't any. By the early 1990s, however, we found ourselves being bombarded by requests from congregations and individuals who wanted to bring a team of people to Guatemala to help us out. At the time, we had approximately ten career or long-term “missionary units” on the field. We saw the first few visits as a great experience. The medical, dental, and construction teams helped to address real needs we as a mission and our partner church, the Lutheran Church in Guatemala, had. But, as I said, we soon found ourselves inundated with requests for mission opportunities from congregations and groups within our church body. This caused us to reflect more on the impact of the visits by short term mission teams.

¹A quick Google search of “short+term+Christian+mission” resulted in over 1.38 million websites!

I have to admit that I began to form more negative attitudes toward the whole short-term missions movement. I began to see examples of the down side of so many well-meaning people coming to the field. I became increasingly critical of short-term missions, and found plenty of articles on the topic that were critical, such as: “Danger Zone: Short-term missions as Tabloid Tourism,” published in *World Christian* in 1999, and an editorial published in *Christianity Today* in 1996 entitled “McMissions,” among several others. Eventually, I guess I would have to admit that the negative attitudes turned into outright hostility toward “short-term” missions, especially the numbers of groups or “teams” going on a one to two week “missions” trip.

Most of my negativity revolved around the lack of preparedness or, I thought, even the unwillingness of some of these groups of people to try to understand the culture of the people they were coming to “serve.” In addition, many of my concerns had to do with dependency issues, which, as a mission, we were trying to avoid. I will address some of these issues below. We are all aware now, that while there are many advocates for responsible short-term missions out there, there continues to be a great deal of hesitancy and negativity on the part of others to embrace short-term missions as a worthwhile and viable approach to the proclamation of the gospel to the entire world.

The real “aha” experience for me, however, occurred when I was advising one of our Ph.D. students in his doctoral dissertation. Indrenath Stanley wrote his dissertation on how the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC) experienced and dealt with the transition from the missionary to the post-missionary era. As we spent many hours together analyzing the data he had collected on the field in India, he discovered that a highly significant factor in promoting a missions vision in the IELC were the mission visits in the mid-1970s of evangelistic teams of from Faith Lutheran Church, Troy, Michigan, under the direction of pastor Richard. Pastor Richard had developed an evangelistic approach, called “Pass-it-on,” based on the Kennedy method, with examples and illustrations from the western worldview. The short-term teams that went to India did not, of course, know the Tamil language. They sang and taught songs in English from the west, and much of what they said and did on these “evangelistic” tours really didn’t make a lot of sense to the Indian mind.

However, the “unintended consequence,” and the important positive impact that the Pass-It-On people had on several congregations of the IELC was that the local Indian church members became especially impressed with the fact that these people would, at their own expense, take their vacation time and their money and travel halfway around the world to share the gospel. The real consequence of those short-term mission visits was that it motivated the local pastors and local church members to carry out more intentional evangelism; and they began to realize that if these people were willing to come half-way around the world to proclaim the gospel, they, too, could do much more to preach the gospel to their own people. The result: The IELC caught a new mission vision and several congregations were planted. To this day, although Pastor Richard died some years ago, those Pass-It-On visits are remembered as a real turning point in the development of the IELC.

It was when I heard about that experience that I began to realize that God does work in marvelous ways, even through people who perhaps went to India naively, with little cultural understanding, and who were there, really, for only a short time. I’m not even sure that the members of Faith today realize how much of an impact those visits

had. But when I heard about it, that is when my attitudes toward short-term missions began to change.

Having said that, there are still issues that I, as a missions executive, working with partner churches and our own career missionaries, would like to address to those interested in short term mission work. These are by no means anything new to most of us, but I do believe they are important considerations that can help us all to be more faithful to our calling to take the gospel to the entire world.

What a Mission Executive Would Want Short-Term Missionaries to Know

1. Short-term missionaries should still prepare themselves before they go.

Most long-term missionaries will go through a great deal of preparation before departing for their field of service. In my own case, I had several months of missions training where I learned mission theology, something of cultural anthropology, linguistics, missions history and practice; but also I was assigned the task of doing research projects on the specific history of Guatemala, on the specific culture of Guatemala, the history of the church in Guatemala, the current events important in the life of Guatemala, and, of course, the Spanish language.

It seems that people involved in short-term missions should also spend at least some time learning more about the people they are going to serve, their history, their culture, their concerns, and even something of their language. Short-term missionaries should learn about cross-cultural issues as they prepare themselves for service. While this is best done under the tutelage of someone experienced in cross-cultural ministry, there are several excellent printed resources available, such as Duane Elmer's *Cross-Cultural Connections*, which is readily accessible to the average reader, but contains a wealth of information for someone stepping out into a cross-cultural missions situation. Of course there are many other titles available.

In addition, all short term missionaries should be led through a study of missions from a Biblical/Theological perspective, so that they can see and understand how what they are doing fits into the *missio Dei*.

While this may seem like overkill to someone who is going for only a few weeks, in the long run it will make the experience more understandable and, I would submit, much more beneficial to both the short term missionaries and those they are going to serve.

2. Consider yourself more as a learner, rather than a doer.

In comparison with the rest of the world, most westerners are known for their “task” orientation. We see a problem and immediately we want to fix it. As many text books on cross-cultural missions point out, we are generally quite optimistic about our ability to resolve any issue or problem given the right resources and right strategy. We want to “do something.” We feel that we are wasting our time if we do not get enough done. However, this “can-do” attitude is sometimes not interpreted by our hosts like we think it is. The problem is that sometimes we are so wrapped up in our own priorities and what we think other people need, that we ignore issues of personal relationships. We fail

to realize that for the people we are “serving” getting to know one another can be more important than getting things done. We may think that we can communicate the love of Jesus most effectively by getting right to work and getting those blocks laid, or that roof put on, or getting whatever project done that we are there for.

For a relational based culture, however, the focus is not so much on task, but on the careful negotiation of trust—of building trust—and that takes time. I am convinced that the most laidback and relaxed westerner is still going to look like a very task oriented person to a non-westerner.

Moreover, if we can assume the role of a learner, many important things can happen. First, we can begin to build healthier relationships. We can begin to appreciate, not only the things that need fixing in a particular culture, but also the positive aspects of that culture. We help to affirm and build up people because we demonstrate that we value what they have to say. And lastly, you know what? We might actually learn many things that will help us in our own personal relationships and in our relationship with God. In my own case, I would have to admit that working in Latin America has taught me to do a better job of taking time for people. It has helped me to be a better listener and a better friend. I have found out that people are much more important than the task before me.

And so short-term missionaries should remember and accept that they are going as learners and not experts about their host culture or about the way people should do things. Ideas can be shared, but more like a consultant learner, not as the one with all the answers.

3. Think of your mission not so much as an adventure, but as a time to love and appreciate people.

I guess this is just my personal pet-peeve, but I wonder about so-called “mission experiences” that seem to be more about having a great adventure than about the serious business of communicating the gospel. In fact, it has become obvious that sponsoring and facilitating adventuresome mission experiences has become big business. I don’t want to single out any organization, but I noticed that one missions organization is copying “reality TV” by offering a “World Race Mission Trip,” complete with videotaped reports sent back at regular intervals as five teams compete with one another as they tour around the world planting indigenous ministries. One of our Lutheran colleges did a PR piece in their advancement magazine entitled “Mission: Adventure.” The picture accompanying the report on the school’s “mission trip” to Costa Rica showed the students white water rafting. There was an advertisement in the Evangelical Missions Quarterly from an organization offering “Extreme Mission Adventures,” with the subtitle, “Adventure with a purpose.”

It seems to me that when we emphasize our own desire for adventure, we are getting away from what should be the focus of what we are trying to do. I would say that a better way of looking at things would be to put the purpose—the mission—ahead of our need to have a great adventure. The Apostle Paul certainly experienced adventure, but I’m not so sure he set out or sought after the adventure of five times having received forty lashes minus one, having been beaten with rods, having been stoned, suffering shipwreck,

spending a night and a day adrift at sea, in peril of robbers, heathen, city, wilderness danger on the road, of hunger and thirst and cold and nakedness (2 Cor. 11:25-27).

It seems that the proper attitude is to go where we are needed most, where we can do the most good. We certainly can have fun doing it, but it seems that if we go on a short-term mission for the sense of adventure, we are not approaching the opportunities we have for Christian witness with the proper attitude. Indeed, Van Rheenen lists a desire for adventure as a defective” mission motivation, quite the opposite from the attitude of servanthood that Christ encourages us to emulate.

I would encourage those interested in short term missions to think of this as an opportunity to love and appreciate people, to serve others, rather than in terms of the adventure that I can have to serve my needs.

4. Strengthen and preserve people’s dignity.

This topic is a natural follow-up to the previous point. We should strive to avoid doing, saying or insinuating anything that will in any way take someone’s sense of dignity and self worth.

On one occasion, a well-meaning short-term missionary recounted to me about how she went on a “dump run.” The mission site she was visiting would make a daily “run” to the huge city dump in Guatemala City for the purpose of giving away bowls of soup to the scores of people who were rummaging through the garbage. This was considered the most exciting thing to do on the mission trip. The way she described it to me made it sound like the exciting thing was to gawk at the suffering, poverty-stricken people in their misery, what one author described as “tabloid tourism.” It was nice to take them some soup, but I guess I felt that a better approach would be to look for more long-term solutions to the people’s needs. When you treat people as objects of your pity, in a sense you take away from their own dignity, and that should be avoided. How about a strategy of spending the day, or even a few days, in the dump, side-by-side with the people, developing relationships, getting to know them and something about their lives. Most Guatemalans that I know, even the poorest of the poor, love to converse.

5. Seek opportunities to walk (and work) side-by-side with local Christians, rather than doing things for them.

This has been a general rule that we have tried to follow in facilitating short-term mission trips in Latin America. We always want to know what the local Christians are putting into the project. Are we going to be carrying out a project on our own, or will the local Christians be working at our sides? I have become increasingly leery of projects that depend entirely on our money and our manpower. On the other hand, working side-by-side with local Christians can be a wonderful and rewarding experience for both the local Christians and the short-term missionaries. Again, adopting the posture of a learner will make the experience even more enriching.

One time a short-term mission team came to Guatemala to help a congregation in a rural area with the construction of their new church building. For several months before the team came, the church members began collecting cement blocks. By the time the team came, they had collected about one-half of what they needed. The visiting team

was able to make funds available to purchase the rest. The local church members helped out side-by-side with the team members in the construction project. Several of the women of the congregation helped to cook the daily meals. They worked together and they ate together. In addition, the team members lived in the village for the two weeks, having converted the church's existing church building into a temporary bunk house. This was the kind of short-term mission effort that built not only a church, but trust and relationships, and all were able to grow in their appreciation for each other and their faith as they learned from one-another.

On the other hand, I remember the pride that a small congregation in Mexico on the boarder with Texas had in their humble church building. They had gathered enough money to purchase a small piece of property. They had gotten together enough materials to erect a provisional shelter from the rain so they could hold their worship services and other activities. As they showed me what they had been able to do on their own, I could see the sense of ownership and commitment that they had toward their fledgling congregation.

Enter the megachurch from Dallas, looking for an opportunity to "do mission work." Surveying the situation, they saw that the location of the property the local Christians had purchased was not the best. Indeed, there was a large, corner lot available nearby. Much too expensive for the small church, of course, but a small matter for the megachurch from Dallas. Then came the construction project. This time the church in Dallas was going to build them a proper church. Teams and teams of workers came down with their money, as the local congregation stood by feeling helpless. To make a long story short, that congregation now has a big, beautiful building on a great piece of property, but it has struggled to survive as a congregation. I wonder if the local Christians, who were so proud of what they were able to accomplish, now didn't feel inadequate. I am quite certain that the strong sense of ownership and stewardship that characterized the congregation a couple of years ago has pretty much gone by the wayside. The point: Don't overwhelm people with your generosity. People's own dignity was in a way taken away from them. Moreover, don't take away opportunities for people to exercise their discipleship.

6. Remember that you are a guest in your host country.

While we all recognize this, sometimes I think we forget to keep it in mind as we deal with merchants, officials and even the local community in general. As guests, we should strive to always treat others respectfully. Sometimes we don't know why things are the way they are, but that doesn't mean that the local people don't have perfectly good reasons for doing things the way they do. It is easy to become overly critical of the culture and ways we don't understand. Duane Elmer has pointed out that in general, when we don't understand something, we will fill in what we don't understand with our own explanation, and in most cases, that explanation will reflect negatively on other people, rather than seeing their ways as merely different.

As a guest, we should strive to treat the people we come across respectfully, whoever they are. The idea of the "ugly American" still can come across when we lose our temper or patience in dealing with people of other cultures.

7. Remember to be sensitive to the culture.

This, of course, goes without saying, or at least it should. However, I have seen examples of groups that, in their zeal to proclaim the gospel, have not spent enough time asking questions and listening to see how misunderstood their message might be.

For example, one music ministry and puppet group came down to conduct a series of VBS classes for children in a humble barrio of Guatemala City. One of the songs they sang and taught to the children, accompanied by gestures, was *My God is so Great, So Strong and So Mighty*. The children seemed to love the song so much that they laughed and laughed as they sang it. At least that's what the music team thought; that is, until someone finally told them that some of the gestures they were using were obscene gestures in Guatemala. I won't go into details. The moral? Don't be afraid to listen and ask questions.

Some of these things have been mentioned above, but it is essential to remember that personal relationships are more important than getting things done in most non-western cultures. Compared to the United States, most non-western cultures place a very high value on hospitality. The westerner sometimes can feel overwhelmed by the hospitality of his hosts. This has two sides to it, because, on the one hand, we perhaps will misread the hospitality as something more than what it is. What I mean is that sometimes we conclude that our mission work was much more appreciated than what it really was. The fact of the matter is that hospitality is simply highly valued, and not to extend it to a guest would bring shame upon the household. On the other hand, be sensitive of the great burden this hospitality can be on the people. I know of one career missionary who told me after a rural congregation had received a series of short-term mission teams, that the people of the congregation were "just tired."

Things like learning enough of the language, both verbal and non-verbal, to properly greet people can go a long way, too.

8. Your actions will speak much louder than your words!

Paul said, "Therefore I encourage you to imitate me." If you will permit me to call upon Duane Elmer again, he points out the strength of non-verbal communication. In fact, he says that non-verbal communication is so powerful that when someone sees you for the first time he or she will have made a judgment about you within one and a half seconds—a judgment about you that sometimes takes a long time to overcome.

When visiting a country as a missionary, remember that you are going as Christ's ambassadors. People know that you are Christians, and much of what they think about Christ will be based upon your behavior. Do you act reverently, or do you act as if you were on a vacation in Las Vegas? Unfortunately, I have to say that we have had some experiences where the behavior of some of the short-term missionaries has gotten a little out of hand. In Guatemala the people are pretty conservative socially, especially in the villages. Loud, boisterous, belligerent, unruly or noisy behavior is just out of sync with the local social customs.

In this same vein, even things like the clothing customs of the local people should be looked into carefully. For example, in Guatemala, in general women do not go around in shorts, and in days gone by, they didn't even wear slacks, only dresses and

skirts. This is certainly changing, but there are still conventions about what is proper dress, and we should take those things into consideration. The same with men. To this day, I don't know of any Guatemalan who walks around in shorts, Bermuda or otherwise.

Sometimes the immodest behavior of missionaries is a scandal, rather than a testimony to the love of God in Christ Jesus. Once a short-term missionary team was taken to the National Palace for a tour. One of the guards at the entrance said he could not enter because he was not dressed properly. He wore Bermudas and sandals without socks. Do you know what he said to the guard? "I've been kicked out of better places than this!"

9. Remember that short-term missionaries are appreciated!

I know that many, many short-term missionaries are of immeasurable service to God's kingdom as they give of their time, talents and resources to further God's mission. There is plenty of criticism of short-term missions out there. There are plenty of issues and examples of short-term missions having gone awry. Of course, the same is true for career missionaries. But the positive impact of short-term missions has been great, and short-term missionaries will continue to make significant contributions, sometimes without even knowing the long-term benefits of what they have done, like the example of the Pass-It-On groups going to India in the 1970s. From my experience as a missions executive for Latin America and the Caribbean, I can say that in probably ninety percent of the cases where short-term missionaries have served, their work, commitment and testimony has been appreciated by our career missionaries and our partner church leaders and members.