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### Short-term Missions: Good and Bad

When a group of North American missionaries came to visit an indigenous tribe in Nigeria, they asked, "How can we help you? What do you need?"

The answer they received was, "We need nothing. We're fine."

The mission group pressed the issue. Finally one of the tribal leaders said, "We don't need that building over there. Could you tear it down for us?"

Feeling like they had hit the jackpot, the North Americans worked diligently to eliminate this useless building, thinking maybe the tribe needed the land for crops.

Near the end of the project, one of the group members asked, "What were you using this building for in the first place?"

"I don't know," shrugged the tribes' patriarch. "Some American group came in and thought we needed a building. So, they built a building"

(Fann and Taylor 51).

Short-term mission trips can have many effects, some good, and some not so good. Both participants and local people experience these effects. As more opportunities and easier access for church groups and individuals to serve have grown, short-term missions have become increasingly popular. In light of the popularity of short-term missions, it seems worthwhile to consider the effects of short-term missions on the participants and those they serve.

Short-term missions have grown and are growing increasingly popular (Jeffrey). Robert Priest, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois, says "...that more than two million U.S. Christians travel abroad each year on short-term mission trips" (Cole). These trips are defined as any length of time up to two years (Adeney). Anything longer is considered long-term and is usually done by career missionaries. A ministry and doing service work are the focuses of short-term missions (Nielsen and Collins). Mission or service work can range from digging trenches, building homes, or even playing with the village kids. Short-term missionaries also work with local churches to be as effective as possible. Many aspects of short-term missions are under scrutiny and it is worthwhile to look at their effects. These aspects are the motives for the trip, money use, time use, providing the right kind of help, and the long-term impact of short-term missions.

Short-termers must have the right motivations. The right motivations are centered on providing a ministry and service. Being a servant and helping others are the best motives for short-term groups to have (Nielsen and Collins).

Too often the wrong motives are the reasons that short-termers become part of a mission team. They seek emotional rewards for themselves instead of helping others (Jeffrey). The trip may act as a therapy, providing participants with that "feel good" feeling (Adeney). A short-term mission trip isn't a pleasure trip for those who seek adventure or thrills. If short-termers have these motives it "...can leave the nationals or long-term missionaries embittered, feeling as if they have been used to host a glorified vacation that used up valuable time, energy, and finances" (Nielsen and Collins). Reverend Roger Peterson feels the same way, "If [the trips] are only about ourselves, then we're doing nothing more than using another culture...to get some benefit at their expense" (Salmon).

Money spent on short-term missions may or may not be being used efficiently. When many churches give to missions, they give to teams of people from their own church because they love having personal involvement. The church loves feeling as though they have contributed personally and intimately to a cause. Personally sending church members out onto the short-term mission field can have a good effect and lead to increased giving for missions, which means that the money can be raised rather easily and quickly (Wax).

A downside of sending out short-term groups is that it can get expensive, especially when sometimes the money given to short-term teams can be used more efficiently if it was given directly to local missionaries or the local church. A team of ten short-termers can add up to about \$20,000 to \$30,000 for the team. That money could be just what the local missionaries or church needs to help their own people help themselves rather than having ten foreign people come all the way to their country to provide assistance (Wax). One study done in 2006 showed that short-term groups "...spent an average \$30,000 on their trips to build one home that a local group could construct for \$2,000" (Salmon).

Although short-term missions can be expensive, the worth of short-term missions is too great not to send any. Most long-term missionaries first became interested in missions because of a short-term mission trip. If the number of short-term missions became less and less that would also mean that the number of career missionaries would become less and less (Wax). Churches are encouraged by what their own people are doing as short-term missionaries and they become passionate about the mission (Wax). This leads to an increased giving for missions, for both short and long-term missions.

Short-termers and the people they serve usually view time well spent in very different ways. Many times short-termers come in just when they are needed, after a devastating tsunami,

an earthquake or another destructive disaster. When this happens, the fast action and quick help to rebuild is important. That is when the short-termers can help the locals get back into homes or back to a normal life as soon as possible. The number of short-term missionaries can be very beneficial in these types of situations. In 2005, after Hurricane Stan hit Central America, many churches and Christian agencies responded immediately. They offered aid and prayer right when it was most needed (“Central”).

However, many times short-term groups will try to get things done too quickly. The groups have the attitude that says things need to get done as soon as possible. This can harm what locals think about their own ability to get stuff done (“Doing”). The locals begin to say that they don’t need to do anything; the foreigners or “gringos” will do it for them (“Doing”). This shows that many people outside of the United States view time differently. Many cultures have a “polychronic view” of time. This means that they invest more in relationships and getting to know each other more than they invest in getting a job done. Therefore, when foreigners come in with a “monochronic view” of time, meaning that time is a resource too important to be wasted, the locals may get discouraged (“Doing”).

It is very important that short-termers remember these opposing views and offer their time. Often, what the locals need is encouragement and companionship, which will take time to be built. The locals need to have relationships with the short-term people who come to help them. “...most low-income people are...suffering from chronic issues that affect their self-image and sense of purpose. Such feelings of inferiority, hopelessness, and meaninglessness cannot be overcome by handouts from a STM team or anybody else” (“Doing”). Toribio Dubon, a leader in a Honduran village says of a group of short-termers that came to help them, “They didn’t come to tell us how to do things, which is what the gringos have always done in the past. These people

came to sweat in the sun with us, to listen, to treat us as equals. We felt blessed by their presence beside us” (Jeffrey).

The relationships that are built are more important than the houses that are built. The Honduras Church World Service program’s coordinator, Don Tatlock, says, “What’s more important are the relationships they build with the poor and what they learn about why the people are poor. And by giving up their time and money to come so far, they’re conveying a sense of love that pays off in increased self-esteem and encouragement among villagers” (Jeffrey). That is why short-termers need to invest in building relationships with the locals.

Building relationships will always be important for short-term missionaries; however, the projects that short-termers do must be a necessity as well. Offering the help that a community needs is the best way to ensure that the community will be better than they were before the mission group came. Short-term groups also must be sure not to harm what the local missionaries and/or church has already established for the community as far as projects, relationships and values. Short-termers must be very careful to be witnesses and servants, not stumbling blocks.

One way to ensure that necessary assistance is provided is to look to the locals, whether it is the long-term missionaries or the local church (“Doing”). Too often short-term teams bring in their own experts, all the while ignoring the local knowledge (Salmon). The locals know best what the community needs and what the traditions and values of the area are. When a short-term group is given better orientation about the country and culture they are going to be visiting, the more likely the short-termers are to act respectfully and honor those traditions and values (Adeney). Short-termers need to learn from the locals, not the other way around. “...going as a learner emphasizes the gifts which poor people have to share with others: the spiritual,

intellectual, physical, and social resources that God has already placed in their community” (“Doing”).

Too often, short-term groups do more harm than good. Short-termers should not come as tourists, seeking adventure, snapping pictures, buying tons of souvenirs (Fann and Taylor 56). Even something as simple as shopping can cause harm. When short-termers spend lots of money on souvenirs, they must think about how it looks to the nationals who cannot afford those things. Those actions can increase locals’ sense of hopelessness (Nielsen and Collins). Short-termers language and immodest dress is often appalling and disrespectful to the locals (Adeney). This type of behavior harms a groups’ witness testimony. When a local pastor has to explain to a parishioner or a villager that the tattoo on a short-termer’s neck does not mean that he or she worships another god, this harms the group’s credibility and witness (Fann and Taylor 56). A mission team from South Carolina went to the poor El Estribo village in Honduras. They “...insisted on handing out \$50 in U.S. money to each family...despite objections by local church workers” (Jeffrey). Ignoring their wishes caused the local churches to refuse to work with mission teams; they now “...insist on working only with those development and evangelistic practices that empower the poor without exposing them to the embarrassing rich” (Jeffrey). This is yet another example of the harm that can happen and, in addition, “...because of inadequate preparation, some short-termers damage existing Christian witness or exhaust missionaries and national leaders” (Adeney). The local ministry that is already in place shouldn’t have to fix these kinds of mistakes, mistakes that can be avoided.

Sometimes these mistakes come in the form of unsuitable assistance. There are so many examples of eager-to-help short-term groups that assisted in the wrong way. Jacqueline Salmon, a Washington Post reporter, tells about some of these trips. “...a wall built on the children’s

soccer field at an orphanage in Brazil that had to be torn down after visitors left. In Mexico, a church was painted six times during one summer by six different groups. In Ecuador, a church was built but never used...it was not needed.” Another time a trench was built on a Caribbean island, but it was filled in after the group left. The group spent a long, hard week digging up the trench, never once experiencing the culture or speaking with local people (Nielsen and Collins). The group that handed out money to the El Estribo village not only ignored local leaders, but offered the wrong kind of aid as well. Short-term groups must ensure that they are offering assistance that is actually needed.

Short-term missions should have long-term impact. Short-term missions should not end like the ones mentioned above, where nothing beneficial became of the help. They should have a lasting effect instead. When a home is built, a family can live in it for a long time. When a relationship is forged, the participants of that relationship will remember each other forever. When a short-terminer comes home so touched by the mission he or she went on, he or she may begin to evaluate whether or not they feel called into long-term missions. That is how many long-term missionaries start out. “Ask most full time missionaries how God gave them a heart for missions and they will usually point back to a short-term mission trip” (Wax). “...short-termers come back changed, with a bigger view of God and the world and an increased willingness to risk for his kingdom” (Adeney).

Short-term missions can have a long-term impact because of the passion that a church might feel after they participated in a short-term mission (Wax). Increased giving and prayer support grow because of sponsoring a short-term mission team. The connections that the church creates in another country may mean that the church will want to continue to send funds and continually pray for that country, specifically for the community and people they met and

worked with. Sometimes the short-termers will forge great relationships with the local missionaries or the local church members and they will continue to contact each other back and forth, learning what's new or what other good work God has done (Fann and Taylor 57).

Another long-term impact the short-termers can have is on the long-term missionaries that are in the area. Although hosting the short-term teams can be a drain on the full time missionaries, many say that hosting them gives them energy and a "renewed zeal for ministry" (Wax). The full time missionaries gain a fresh perspective and they remember once again why they so diligently serve.

Sometimes short-term missions can become too much of a good thing. "Unfortunately, much of our short-term work fosters dependency instead of empowering people" (Adeney). Dependency is a big problem as far as short-term missions go. Handing out goods like food, clothing, and even services can decrease willingness and the "...capacity of low-income communities to be stewards of their own human and physical assets" ("Doing"). A lot of times locals are only receptive to the short-term teams that come because they are getting food or clothing out of the well meaning short-termers. The locals will probably only be receptive until the freebies run out (Fann and Taylor 55).

When the locals have the ability to help themselves but ignore that because the "gringos" will do it for them, it is damaging ("Doing"). Short-term missions can have a harmful long-term effect if they are as Miriam Adeney, a research professor of mission, speculates, "Do we have the right to use others to sensitize us to poverty and lostness if it means dampening their initiative and reinforcing their dependency on outside materials and skills?" Short-term groups have to avoid becoming a stumbling block and being enablers of dependency.



Short-term mission trips have can many different effects. Trips that are carefully thought-out and planned offer the best experience for both the short-termers and the locals. The first step to a successful short-term mission is having the right motivations. Even though money for a short-term mission might be considered wasted, spending money wisely and in an appropriate manner will make it worth the cost. Time should be invested in relationships and helping people not only emotionally, but with physical acts of service too. Offering the right type of assistance usually depends on the situation; however, allowing local churches or missionaries to determine what is or isn't needed will ensure that the aid given is necessary. Finally, all short-term missions should create long-term impacts for both the short-termers and the local people.

If the group of Americans in Nigeria would have listened to the locals in the first place, the unneeded building would have never existed. Its story would have never been written down or told. Instead, such a mistake did happen, and it proves as a lesson and reminder for all people who participate on short-term missions.

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