

SHORT TERM MISSIONS: ARE THEY WORTH THE COST?

Just as I sat down to write this article the phone rang. It was a friend here in Honduras asking me if we would be willing to house a short-term mission group she was hosting. I complimented her on her timing and asked what she thought about short-term groups. “Well,” she said, “Everyone knows that short-term missions are for the benefit of those who come, not the people here.”

If that statement is true (and we can assume it is for her), then thousands of people are raising millions of dollars each year to do something not for others, but for themselves. Are we fooling ourselves by pretending these trips are helping the poor and those not yet reached by the gospel when really they are no more than a good excuse to travel to a foreign country? Can we justify raising money for that kind of cause? It would be easier to ignore those kind of questions, but as Christians and good stewards, we need to answer them. Short-term missions must be more than just religious tourism and the money raised for short-term projects must be an investment that goes beyond covering the expenses of a week spent in a foreign country.

Times have changed. Missionaries used to raise small fortunes to go to Africa and Asia and often did not return for many years, if at all. The decision to become a missionary was life changing and usually permanent. Today, modern air travel has made even the farthest corners of the earth accessible to anyone who can come up with the cost of a ticket. So, foreign mission work has become something young and old can do during a break in their normal life’s activities. Thousands of people--students, busy professionals and retirees--go all over the world to build schools, run health brigades, do street evangelism, work in orphanages and help out missionaries.

People go on short-term projects for many reasons--a young person feels a close personal relationship with God and wants to share that with others, a successful physician feels blessed and wants to use her skills to help people in need. A construction worker knows that pouring cement on the dirt floor of a poor family’s home will help keep children healthy.

Help or hinder?

A group of 18 students raised \$30,000 to work in an orphanage in Honduras during their spring break. They painted three rooms, helped clean up the playground and played with the children during their free time. Everyone had a great time and the children loved the extra attention. A student returning from the trip remarked excitedly to a friend: “My trip to Honduras was such a blessing! It was so neat to see the way the staff cared for those children—and they only make about \$80 a month. I really grew as a Christian by being there.

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The orphanage’s budget for the year is \$50,000. That pays for building maintenance, teachers, houseparents, the cook and clothes and food for the children. One staff member sighed as she confided, “The money that group raised for their week here is more than half of our whole budget. We could have used that money to do so much for the children.”

Short-term missionaries usually go out to the mission field with high expectations and they are not often disappointed. If you've ever talked to someone who has just returned you've probably heard testimonies like these:

- “The poor villagers where we worked taught me so much about being a Christian and what it really means to live by faith.”
- “People were so open and friendly with us even though we didn't speak their language.”
- “This trip really made me think about how much I have, and how little most people must live on. I'm going to have to rethink my spending habits.”

You might have noticed that although the reason people give for going on short-term missions trips is to help others, most will tell you that in the end they received much more than they gave. They will describe how amazing it felt to be in another country, worshipping with Christians in another language, or how humbling it was to see the Christian witness of people who live with less than they could ever imagine. Short-term missions trips, when they are done well have a number of strengths. They:

- Get people excited about doing kingdom work--plain and simple. Mission agencies (if they are being honest) will tell you that the main reason they help coordinate short-term groups is not because they do so much good but because people return to North America more willing to give their time and money to support the work permanent staff are doing. One of the Spring Break students who volunteered in the orphanage mentioned above has already sent the staff a check for a \$100.
- Help people see beyond their own backyards. Getting out into poor countries (where most of the world's population lives) helps young and old alike re-evaluate their priorities and gives them a vision for becoming global Christians, who care about the problems of God's people, not just in their own congregation but wherever they are.
- Build bridges between North American Christians and Christians in the third world. Developing friendships with people from other countries helps us to understand others better and helps others to understand us.
- Show some people (although certainly not everyone) that mission work is where they want to spend their life. Getting a small taste of what life is like outside their own culture is just what some people need to make a full-time commitment to mission work.

So, short-term missions can go beyond religious tourism and provide life-changing experiences for those who go on them. The problem is that most often short-term missions are promoted as service projects—participants believe that their main reason for going, and the reason they are raising money, is to help others during the week or two they are there. Often groups return home knowing almost nothing of the real problems facing the people they visited. These are some of the criticisms that are frequently leveled at short-term groups:

1. Short-term missions are expensive

The Spring Break group mentioned earlier raised \$30,000. That's a lot of money in anybody's book. But in the third world where the average yearly income is about \$100 a year, it's an incredible sum of money. Are we sure we're making the best use of that money when we sponsor short-term missions groups?

2. Short-term missions almost always do work that could be done (and usually done better) by the people of the country they visit.

The Spring Break group spent \$30,000 to paint and clean the orphanage in Honduras. They did a job that could have been done by a Honduran who needed the money. Unemployment in the third world is as high as 30% and most people struggle to put food on the table. We need to ask ourselves if it is right to spend so much money to send North Americans to do jobs that could be done by third world people who desperately need the work.

3. Short-term groups often miss out on learning about the culture and people they visit.

I asked a member of the Spring Break group if they would be seeing any of the country while they were here. She answered confidently, "Oh no, we came here to work and to serve. We don't want to waste any of our time just sight-seeing! Although the desire to serve is a good one, it can be paternalistic. How would we feel if visitors from another country (say Japan) came to West Michigan to spend a week volunteering at the Guiding Light mission, ate only food they brought along from Japan, talked only with each other and never left the building. If we were feeling kind, we'd just think they were missing out on a lot and if we weren't we'd be offended. The people of the third world are proud of their culture and their country. They enjoy visitors who are curious and want to understand their lives.

4. Short-term missions require a great deal of coordination and time invested by their hosts

A doctor I know in Nicaragua runs a health clinic for poor families. He trains community workers to promote better health in the community and treats serious illnesses at almost no charge. The clinic can barely keep up with the demand for their services. But the doctor spends about three months of the year preparing for and hosting U.S. medical brigades. He admits that the brigades accomplish little (the visiting doctors mostly treat headaches and back pain) but he doesn't dare to discourage them because he is afraid he will lose the funding his clinic receives from the U.S. organization that promotes the brigades.

5. Short term groups can send the wrong message to Third world Christians

A Honduran friend of ours is a bricklayer. He was excited because a work team from the Presbyterian Church was coming to build two houses in his neighborhood and he had time to help them. I talked to him after the group had left and asked how it had gone. “Well,” he said, “I found out quickly enough that I was in the way. The North Americans wanted to do things their way and they made me feel like I didn’t know what I was doing so I only helped the first day. Why were they in such a hurry?”

Because short-term missions groups want so much to solve problems, they can make third world Christians feel incapable of doing things on their own. Many groups, instead of trying to work with national Christians, come with a take-charge attitude that leaves their hosts feeling frustrated and unsupported. They send the message that if a job is going to be done right it needs to be done by a North American. And of course, since the groups are only around for a week or so, the nationals end up having to pick up where they left off.

6. Short-term groups have trouble doing word evangelism

One of the main goals of many short-term groups is to evangelize the people they meet. But since most do not speak the language of the country they visit, their attempts at word evangelism are usually very limited. Missionaries usually spend at least a year learning a new language because they know they can not share the good news of the gospel if they can not communicate in the language of the people they are ministering to.

So, to sum up: too many short-term mission groups spend a lot of money to do jobs nationals could do, create extra work for full-time missionaries, cause frustration and bad feelings among the nationals who host them, isolate themselves from opportunities that would allow them to learn about the culture and people they are helping and are unable to evangelize.

So, what does that mean for short-term missions? Should we declare a moratorium on all short-term trips and focus only on supporting full-time missionaries?

I don’t think so. Now, more than ever, Christians all over the world need to share in each other’s lives and support one another. But we need to start thinking about the best way to do that. We need to rethink the way we do short-term missions. We need to stop thinking about short-term missions as a service we perform and start to think of them as an incredible opportunity to learn. If money were raised to send volunteers to other countries to learn what Christians could do to change the lives of people living in poverty and if those volunteers committed to sharing their knowledge with others, short-term missions could have God glorifying outcomes beyond our expectations. Here are five suggestions that could help

change short-term missions from religious tourism into genuine kingdom building.

1. **Focus on learning, not on doing.**

Christians don't like to sit on their hands. We like to serve by doing. But in the case of the Third World, we can do much more by learning all we can in a week than by keeping just our hands busy. Short-term could help the country they visit by finding answers to questions like these:

- Why is this country so poor?
- What problems are people here facing?
- What has our own country done to contribute to the problems they face?
- What can Christians do to help?
- How can we support the work Christian nationals and missionaries are doing?

The group that spent time in the orphanage could have focused on finding out why so many children who are not orphans are living in orphanages, what the government of Honduras does to support families and how U.S. policies affect the poor families of Honduras. They could then commit to helping those children over the long-term, not just for the week they are there.

2. **Prepare for your trip**

That means more than just packing your suitcase. Read up on the country you will visit and study as much as you can about its people and culture. Find out what problems it faces. Try to learn a little of the language you will be hearing. Show respect for its people by knowing something about their lives before you arrive. You'll find that your trip is much more meaningful when you understand a little about the people you will meet.

3. **Coordinate with Nationals**

Spend time with the people of the country you visit. Make sure they are involved in the project you work on and work side by side with them. Ask questions about their lives and their problems. They will give you an understanding of the country that a foreigner can not. If you have a skill they could use, ask if they would like to learn it. If they know how to do something you don't, ask if they will teach you.

4. **Support long-term work**

One author suggests that all short-term missions groups pledge to spend the same amount of money supporting the project they visit as they spent on their trip. Invest your money not just in short-term projects but in the people and organizations that are working on long-term solutions to the

problems they face. If you're interested in evangelism, support nationals who want to share the good news of the gospel full-time. If you are concerned with the health needs of the people of the third world, support programs that are trying to solve those problems.

5. Get involved as a global Christian when you return

If you ask the right questions on your trip you'll find out a lot about how rich countries can help or hurt third world countries. Follow up on what you learn. Join groups that are fighting to help the third world. Support organizations that are working to fight the evil caused by sin in our world. Write letters to your Congressmen telling him what you learned and what you believe our government should do to support other countries. Tell others what you have learned and encourage them to get involved.

Short-term missions are expensive. They use money that Third World Christians can desperately use. But short-term missions are worth every penny if they are used as the beginning of a long-term relationship. Money invested in learning about the people of the Third World, their problems, and what can be done to help is money well spent.

A Short Term Project with a Long-Term impact

Sonia just returned with seven other young people from a trip to El Salvador. The group went with the idea of developing a long-term relationship with a group of Christian young people there. They spent a week traveling with the Salvadoran young people to the countryside where farmers told them about how they had suffered during the recently-ended war and how they are trying to improve their lives now. They talked with Christian political leaders who told them what they thought El Salvador's biggest problems were. They worshipped with new friends in San Salvador and after the service listened as the pastor told them what he thought they could do to really help Salvadorans. Sonia and the group returned excited to tell their family and friends what they had learned about life in El Salvador. They began saving money to support an organization which helps Christian veterans of the war learn new skills and made plans to help two of their young Salvadoran friends visit their church. Says Sonia, "I had no idea what the people of El Salvador have gone through in the past ten years. The war was really horrible. I'm going to do all I can to prevent those kinds of wars from happening again. My eyes were really opened by that trip.