



“In Praise of Short-term Missions”

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Well, I'm pretty sure the title for this column has never before appeared in the pages of *MF*. While troubles remain in the theory and practice of short-term missions (STMs), this issue shows that there is much to be thankful for in this incredible movement. It is always easier to criticize than encourage, to fear the problems than believe in the potential, or to control rather than unleash. So here are aspects of short-term missions for which we can truly be thankful. Please accept my apologies for speaking only of the American experience. We have much to learn about STMs in other contexts.

First, short-term missions are invaluable in mobilizing every-day believers. A tagline for the broader STM movement could easily be “just one look, that's all it took.” There is undoubtedly no other single tool that has done more to introduce average believers to other cultures and contexts. Each year, more than 1.5 million U.S. believers travel abroad on short-term trips. We can rejoice that so many believers are being exposed to a world their parents and grandparents never saw. Surely many of these people feel God calling them to long-term mission involvement while on a short-term jaunt. Not only do STMs open their eyes to the needs of the world in general, they also give them a first-hand experience of some aspect of mission work, not to mention the personal discipleship that may occur. This parallels the growth in mission involvement that occurred in the early twentieth century when those returning from the World Wars founded structures to meet the needs they had seen while away from home.

Second, STMs are invaluable in mobilizing every-day churches, putting the missions piece front and center of church consciousness. This is really just a corporate application of the first point. For missionaries and agencies who often feel like they are knocking on the back doors of churches trying to get in, this is a great turn of events, an unforeseen coup. Many churches have gone from “zero to sixty” in a matter of months with regard to mission interest and involvement, solely because of one short-term trip. STMs, at least those done in partnership with a mission agency, help connect churches and agencies, which is crucial for the survival of those agencies. Another part of this is the impact STMs have on those studying for the ministry. One study showed that 51 percent of all MDiv students reported STM involvement¹, an encouraging fact when you consider the dearth of mission studies mandatory for future ministers. Having pastors with STM experience is a significant factor, since pastors are a major piece of a church's mission commitment.

Third, STMs can bring innovation to mission strategy. With new eyes come new ideas. Even when the new eyes aren't those of an “expert”, there remains much to be said for what happens when those from different backgrounds apply their skill-set to the mission context. Medical mission is a good example. Begun as an effort to care for missionaries, medical specialists soon saw the many needs around them in the local population and created ministries for them not originally envisioned. “Business as Mission” (BAM) is a more recent example. In some ways, the same thing has happened among business people that happened

with medical people many years ago—lay people (not pastors or Bible teachers) went overseas and simply applied their training and skill-sets to a new situation. It would be interesting to know the percentage of mission innovations that have started just this way. STMs foster this important interaction between a lay person's occupation and the mission context. Such cross-disciplinary pollenization is the seedbed for innovation.

Finally, STMs are a good rebuke to us mission “professionals” that we are not in charge and that God often smiles on ideas that we might find laughable. Who could have anticipated what God would do with five stones and a sling or what Jesus might do with five loaves and two fish? When Jesus told Peter to throw the net on the right side of the boat after they had been fishing all night, I imagine that even the most novice fisherman wouldn't have been impressed with Jesus' suggestion. One would expect far more expert advice than that. And yet that simple act, which had undoubtedly been tried many times during the whole night-long excursion, broke the nets. Because the catch was so unusual for such a simple act, John recognized something was going on here that went beyond skill-set and expertise. It dawned on him and he said, “It is the Lord.” (John 21:7). We may think we know what methodology is needed to be expert fishermen. But we must always keep our eyes open for the unusual, the too simple or the amateurish. It just might be the Lord. ^f

1. Priest, Robert J. and Priest, Joseph Paul, “They See Everything, and Understand Nothing? – Short-Term Mission and Service Learning” in *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXVI, no. 1, January 2008.