

A FRAMEWORK FOR INCORPORATING THE ARTS IN SHORT-TERM MISSIONS



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As I jotted down Hausa lyrics and melodies on a four-week visit to church members in Nigeria, I had no idea that eight years later a focus on the arts of others would become central to my life's calling.¹ In Nigeria I realized the power of local arts to move people as I saw believers struggling with English hymns, but becoming enthusiastic and animated when they sang indigenous praise songs accompanied by gourds.

On this trip, I had taken my violin to entertain a group of isolated foreigners. Artistic short-termers usually do demonstrate their own arts in the host culture, and for good reason: this is what they know! Such efforts can have powerful impact, but my reflections in this article emphasize that short-term workers can also make a significant impact through involvement with culturally appropriate arts. Potentially, short-termers can make an even greater impact in this area if they come humbly to learn from the culture and build friendships, with a desire to validate and encourage the arts of the local believers.

MISSIONAL QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Some practical and missiological questions are crucial to ask at the outset: How can anyone learn enough about others' arts, culture, and language to play any useful role on a short-term trip? Will their efforts not actually result in importing arts from globally dominant cultures and unintentionally promoting models that undervalue local forms of creativity?

FOUR EXAMPLES OF MEANINGFUL SHORT-TERM ENCOUNTERS

The following accounts illustrate various ways that arts specialists can engage with local arts in short-term cross-cultural mission, with each type of engagement having the potential for life-changing effects.

1. In 2008 two music graduates went to Cambodia. Briefly trained in fieldwork methods, they visited a remote village. With their encouragement, local believers created a Christian song in their mother tongue—as far as they knew, it was the first Christian song in their language in that whole region. Not only did villagers, including a Buddhist monk, want to learn it, but the believers continued songwriting after the visit.
2. In 2010 a small team helped in a workshop for four language groups in Nepal. Each group created new songs, and the first Christian songs in a minority language and style were composed, inspiring a heavy metal musician to imagine a renaissance of his traditional culture. One team member has since returned long-term.
3. Working as short-term teams, visual artists have at times incorporated local imagery into their art or into their work with local artists. Then they have displayed the art in accessible spaces and set aside times for interaction with the public about the art. In one situation a painting on display depicted a lock, through which could be seen a light-filled opening.² An old man strolled past and then “stood stunned . . . someone

had just painted his life.” When he asked, “Can you please tell me, what is the key that will unlock the door of my life, and let me run into the light of God?” the artist was able to share about the light of Christ.³

4. In 2010 a professional harpist spent some months in Japan and started to learn the koto and shamisen and some Japanese melodies. The churches arranged harp recitals where she included traditional melodies, drawing many who otherwise excuse themselves from church events. Returning to her home country, she played outside for a wedding. A Japanese passerby stopped to talk, touched by the Japanese melody she was playing. This harpist has now returned full time to Japan, sometimes accompanying a Japanese Christian singer, ministering to many through music, including survivors of the 2011 quake and tsunami.⁴

HOW CAN SHORT-TERM MISSIONS TEAMS FACILITATE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE ARTS?

Most disaster stories about short-term missions (STM) arise from inadequate preparation and self-centered attitudes of spiritual tourism. If the focus of a project is to encourage local arts creation, many of these hazards can be avoided, and the project can result in genuine benefits to all parties, since from initial recruitment to final debriefing the emphasis is on the needs of the receiving community. Particular attention needs to be paid to training, motivation, strategy, and relational intention.

1. *Training.* Prioritizing culturally appropriate arts in STM requires specialized training that equips participants to focus on the people, culture, and arts of their host community. If ethnodoxology practices are new to these interns, their preparation will need to be longer than normal to equip them well for their roles as arts researchers and facilitators.
2. *Motivation.* During recruitment and training the expectations of all parties should be made clear. As learners and helpers, a short-termer’s motivation should arise from a genuine desire to assist nationals. Demonstrating their own art may at times be desirable, but the main aim is to engage with the arts of that community and to encourage cultural insiders in their own creativity.
3. *Strategy.* A clear strategy needs to be agreed on so that guests truly serve the local church. Frequently the biggest service they do for the local church is to energize their creativity and provide special stimulus for them to arrange an event. The arts for the event are often produced in a workshop, and such an arts workshop should generally

have an experienced facilitator—an “arts catalyst.” This facilitator should guide the process, help if creativity dries up, mentor the short-term workers, and work with local leaders. Such a facilitator may be a leading member of the visiting team, a national, or a field worker.

4. *Relational intention.* If the guests’ intention is to build authentic relationships, it is very helpful for the strategy of both senders and hosts to include plans for ongoing contact, often through successive visits. A long-term strategy of this nature is more likely to result in significantly greater benefits to the receiving community than can be achieved in a single visit. On a first visit, visitors build relationships as well as do research and encourage arts creation, as needed. On later visits this process can go to a deeper level. Eventually a worker may return for a more long-term stay or visit regularly, getting to know the people, language, and culture better. As this happens, the believing artistic community may also suggest continuing strategies.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SHORT-TERM ARTS ENGAGEMENT

How can arts students and practitioners get involved? Fortunately, since the rise of ethnodoxology from the mid-1990s, short-term programs with an explicit focus on culturally appropriate arts have been developing. Organizations with such programs include Heart Sounds International (OM Arts) and Resonance (WEC International).⁵ In addition, since this field is developing so quickly, interested people can contact a range of agencies to consider where they can best offer their gifts to Christ’s service. 

¹ Reprinted with permission from Krabill, James R. et al, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 151–154.

² Drake, Bill “The Lock and the Door”, OM Arts International, www.missions-trips-arts-billdrake.blogspot.com/2010/10/lock-and-door.html.

³ Also see Anonymous, “Peace Reflected Artistically in North Africa”, OM Artslink, Summer 2007, www.omartslink.org/getInspired/inspiredNorthAfrica07.php; Anonymous, “Finding Riches Stored in Secret Places”, OM Artslink, 2009, www.omartslink.org/news/news_NA_finding_riches.php; and similar stories on this website. For more on this type of artistic engagement, see chapter 30 by Geinene Carson in the *Ethnodoxology Handbook*, Visual Arts as a Bridge to Engaging People of Other Cultures.

⁴ For more examples of artistic involvements in situations of trauma healing, see the article by Harriet Hill on pages 20-21 in this issue of *Mission Frontiers*, “The Arts and Trauma Healing in Situations of Violence and Conflict”.

⁵ See www.heart-sounds.org and www.resonancearts.net. Other agencies with cross-cultural arts training and/or ministry include ACT International (www.actinternational.org), GIAL’s Center for Excellence in World Arts (www.gial.edu), and OM Arts International (www.arts.om.org).