



If pioneer mission is a complex, specialized enterprise, volunteers are not an alternative to in-depth missionary wisdom.

Ralph D. Winter



Dear Reader,

Some problems are so big or so urgent that we cannot wait until a solution has been achieved to tell about them and attract attention to them. No good solution? This may be an unhappy editorial!

Who's going to do mission—the mission agency or the local church?

Maybe both, but note the new factor: never in American history have more local churches been more interested in having a hand in the mission cause!

- Already waves of high school and college students are fanning out across the globe in the hundreds of thousands.
- Already hundreds of congregations are buying into the idea that it is less expensive to send money to hardworking overseas pastors to extend their outreach than it is to send American missionaries to places where there are no pastors.
- Already dozens of congregations are bypassing the mission agencies and sending their own members overseas under merely the congregation's supervision.
- Awareness and involvement on a global level has never been greater. Citizens, classrooms, businesses are now expected to be "globalized." There is no turning back.
- Never in mission history have long-term workers had more visitors from home churches.

All this ought to be good news, but it does not seem to me to be altogether good news.



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Really, can anything be wrong with this?

YES, because somehow in all of this the earlier congregational *ignorance* of what missions is has now been replaced by extensive *misinformation* about missions!

The mission agencies can still do their work even if ignorance pervades the pew. But now congregations are stumbling into a good deal of misinformation about missions, eagerly simplifying, short-circuiting serious approaches.

How in the world did a highly sensitive, delicate, specialized task like missions become something a volunteer could do in two weeks?

How can a field missionary tell an excited supporter "It would be better if you would stay home and not know what I am doing than to come over for a few days and go home with gross misconceptions?"

Worse still, is it wise for keen young people (whose hearts are warmed concerning the world's lost peoples) to go out by thousands on scary two-week trips to totally strange places, not even seeing a missionary at a distance, and returning home overawed by the apparently hopeless task of reaching the world with the Gospel?

There is no book called "Missions for Dummies." One could be written, but it would be painfully complex and inevitably confusing to the arm-chair reader. Why?

NO HUMAN ENDEAVOR is as full of unforeseen, unexpected, apparently unreasonable or certainly baffling obstacles. No role requires more intelligence, stability of heart and life, and

more dogged endurance than the role of a serious missionary.

Let's look at one perfectly huge example of failed missions.

For 500 years Europeans have been pouring across the Atlantic to lodge and put down roots in the "New World"—the Western Hemisphere—and encountering the so-called Native Americans.

Regrettably, during those five centuries missionary efforts on this side of the Atlantic have been constantly damaged, derailed, and destroyed by the interference of both well-meaning and malicious efforts, that is, by all the "other" people who have come along, vastly outnumbering missionaries to our native peoples. Even U.S. government interference has often worked out to ghastly tragedies on top of the patient and thoughtful previous efforts of many missionaries—who had lived among the aboriginal peoples long enough to know better.

Missionaries outnumbered?

That is what is happening right now. The U.S. is now fielding 350,000 "short-term" volunteers and only 50,000 career missionaries.

Even if these 350,000 volunteers did not deplete the funds of any donors who also support standard mission efforts, the false or misleadingly incomplete knowledge these short-term volunteers acquire in two weeks

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scarcely gives them better insight into missions and may give them a subconscious hopelessness.

There is no question that most such volunteers return with deepened spiritual lives

and somewhat globalized understandings. Short-term sending organizations are very creative in adding all kinds of wholesome learning experiences to their people.

However, ninety percent of short-termers never see a missionary at work. Only ten percent may truly discover that missionaries are level-headed,

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intelligent people with significant results—whether they make any personal contribution or fathom how those results were accomplished.

Well, is the answer to send the 90% where they will meet real missionaries? Theoretically, yes. Practically, no, because the much smaller number of career missionaries are nowadays often already flooded with visitors from home. The number of career workers needs to double if significantly more of our short-termers can actually visit real missionary work.

The final goal of missions is to win people to Christ and to glorify the Father, but *the immediate obstacle is cross-cultural mission in places where you can't win people to Christ the way it is done at home*. That first task is to understand the un-understandable, to penetrate the baffling complexities of mysteriously “different” situations. Only then can “winning people to Christ” begin effectively. By then it is no longer a mission field, strictly speaking, but simply an overseas church movement.

It simply isn't true that short-term volunteers can help much with the complexities of that initial breakthrough, which is the most crucial mission task.

- Suppose a local hospital were short on surgeons. Would it invite volunteers to pitch in for two-week turns in the operating room?
- Suppose a legal firm were to lack attorneys. Would it ask local churches to send in two-week volunteers to help?
- Suppose the Air Force lacked pilots. Would they call upon short-term citizens to help out?

Obviously, if pioneer mission is a complex, specialized enterprise that has failed as often as it has succeeded—due to amateurish approaches—volunteers are not an alternative to in-depth missionary wisdom.

So what CAN willing volunteers do?

1. They can, of course, visit former mission fields that have now become

church movements. But that's not missions; it is the fruit of missions.

2. Those with a true zeal for mission can make very sure local congregations do not move money from serious long-term work to short-term trips, thinking that is a reasonable alternative to missions.
3. Encourage those who truly want to help the cause of missions to do everything they can to highlight the truly amazing accomplishments of long-term workers, and encourage young people to make the cause of missions an exciting life-work even if they don't become field workers. Mobilizers at home are just as important as workers on the front line. A mission-minded pastor is likely much more important to the mission cause than a field missionary.
4. Beware of zany ideas. I know of one congregation of about 400 which in ten years got almost its

entire membership overseas to visit its “adopted people.” No standard agency was in the picture. In ten years little more than a few wells were drilled. No thrilled followers of Christ have resulted. Little or no understanding of the cultural context of a thoroughly Muslim tribe has been employed or resulted. Even if \$1 million of the Lord's money had not been mainly wasted, think of the disheartened congregation that can see no real results after a decade of earnest and expensive, but largely futile, effort!

By contrast, one missionary family in another place, with little money involved, but with advanced understanding of Islam has sparked a movement which over the years has created tens of thousands of devout, Bible-reading Muslim followers of Christ. *In-depth knowledge does make a difference.* 🌐

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