

Do Short-Term Teams and Disciple Making Movements (DMMs) Mix?

“I see waves of young people spreading the gospel across the whole world,” said Youth With a Mission’s visionary pioneer, Loren Cunningham. In 1960 when he said this, the concept of short-term missions was revolutionary. Many thought the idea at best, naïve, and at worst, destructive. In that era, missions were *only* done by long-term workers who dedicated their entire careers to serving as missionaries. What could young people do? “Much damage!” thought many experienced field practitioners.

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This vision, however, was from the Lord. Loren walked forward in persistent faith and obedience. He rallied youth from around the world to answer God’s call to the nations. As short-term missions gained both popularity and credibility, other agencies also began programs to send young people into the world’s harvest fields.

Today, Youth With a Mission (YWAM) has grown into a large missions movement with tens of thousands of long-term staff working in thousands of teams in over 1,000 locations. YWAM workers come from nearly every country in the world, including places like Indonesia, Nepal, Mozambique and Colombia.

Many of those missionaries (we call ourselves YWAMers) today serve as career missionaries. We are also not so

young anymore! In addition to lots of youth, there are now many grey heads among us.

YWAM Frontier Missions Begins

In the mid-1980s, a group within YWAM felt led by the Lord to pioneer a specific emphasis within the broad-based mission to intentionally focus on planting churches among unreached peoples. This part of YWAM became known as YWAM Frontier Missions (YWAM-FM).

For YWAM-FM staff, we recognize short-term missions as a big part of our broader mission’s ethos. With our specific focus on starting DMMs, we are often faced with the question of what to do with short-term teams. *Can teams make a positive contribution to starting a Disciple Making Movement? Or will they hinder the emerging of sustainable indigenous movements?*

Not a Unique Question

This question is not unique to YWAM’s Frontier Mission field workers. In today’s mission scenario, many supporting churches expect to send short-term teams to help. Receiving teams, from time to time, can feel necessary to ensure that supporting churches continue to invest in our ministries.

We must carefully weigh the risks and benefits of bringing short-term teams into an area where we are attempting to launch a Disciple Making Movement. There are indeed risks. But there are also benefits both for the receiving workers and the team that comes. To reap these benefits, there must be careful team preparation as well as buy-in to the broader DMM vision and values.

BY **C. ANDERSON**

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Disasters, Distractions and Financial Issues

When we lived in South Asia, many, many short-term teams came. Where we were living attracted teams due to its beautiful mountains, rugged landscape and warm people. In the 1990s we (YWAM in that country) had a full-time person who facilitated the many, many teams that would come. Operation Mobilization (OM) did something similar. We were flooded with foreign young people wanting to make a contribution.

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It was good...and it was bad. Long-term workers who were trying to focus on discipling new believers were continually pulled away from that work to care for the needs of cross-cultural “newbies.” Though attempts were made to give orientation, cultural mistakes were made. Crisis situations including accidents, and even deaths of short-term team members, took much time and energy from the long-term staff.

I remember one team that came. They strongly believed they should go and share the gospel in front of a significant religious monument. They were insensitive to the culture and norms. This angered locals, *creating* rather than *removing* barriers to the gospel. We were glad to see them go when they finally boarded the plane home! There were other issues too.

Some of our local staff who spoke English well were recruited to help the teams. It became known among the South Asian staff that if you needed support, the answer was to host a foreign team. “Having them come may or may not be helpful to the work,” it was thought. “But it will allow you the opportunity to build relationships with those who might give you money.” Unhealthy dependency was often the result of having foreign teams.

A Better Question

These things were sad to watch. Teams sacrificed greatly to come work among the unreached. They raised money, traveled far, made great sacrifices and came hoping to make a significant contribution.

A few days ago, while running a webinar on Disciple Making Movements, I was asked a question. “Can short-term teams start a Disciple Making Movement (DMM)?” It was immediately apparent to me that the person asking had only a shallow understanding of what a DMM was. Otherwise, the answer would be obvious.

A Disciple Making Movement is something that (while growing rapidly) takes a significant long-term commitment. It requires years of sacrifice and investment. An absolute minimum commitment of two or three years is needed, and for many places where DMMs happen, those who start them invest for their entire lives.

It was a worthy question though, and I think I understood the heart behind it. A better question would have been, “How can a short-term team *assist* and *contribute* to the starting of a Disciple Making Movement?”

Four Much Needed Gifts Short-Term Teams Bring

There are some wonderful things that short-term workers can contribute. Long-term field workers must be careful not to be too cynical and miss out on these wonderful blessings.

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1. FAITH

Short-term teams come with fresh faith and courage. They have been praying and preparing. The team is expectant that God will work powerfully. A fresh injection of faith to discouraged workers in hard places can make a big difference! They may have been laboring for years without fruit or breakthrough. Instead of calling the short-termers naïve, receive and feed off of their enthusiasm and God-given faith.

2. BOLDNESS

Young people and teams in general, can be quite bold. Granted, sometimes they are too bold for the liking of long-termers. They can make us feel uncomfortable. Yes, they do need orientation, but *bold witness* is a vital characteristic of a Disciple Making Movement. Encourage and make room for them to be courageous in witnessing, in praying for the sick and in asking God to bring a breakthrough in your area.

3. ENTHUSIASM AND ENERGY

Weariness is common for long-term workers in difficult places. Daily living can take its toll and missionary life in the frontiers can be quite grueling. Again, allow the team's enthusiasm to ignite you rather than repulse you. Years ago, you too had that same enthusiasm and energy. Invite them to pray over you and minister to you. Let them refresh your spirit. Don't be cynical or critical of their excitement.

4. MAN-POWER

Abundant gospel-sowing and extra-ordinary prayer strategies require many people. Take advantage of the freely available man-power of short-term volunteers. Let them go into new places where you haven't had time to go. Let them do prayer walks, distribute literature and Bibles (if appropriate) and get the gospel out! It is often helpful to give teams a combination of things to do.

Three Strategic Activities Short-Term Teams Can Effectively Help With

I. PRAYER

Teams can come alongside missionaries who are trying to start a movement by helping with prayer saturation. Several long-term DMM focused teams in India use short-term teams very effectively this way. They train the teams to engage in prayer, intercession, spiritual warfare and worship. The impact of these teams has been tremendous! They have helped to break up the hard spiritual ground so the seeds of the gospel can be sown. After the team leaves, be sure to invite those short termers to become key intercessors who will regularly pray for a breakthrough in your area.

2. ONE-ON-ONE EVANGELISM

Language is an important factor. Much depends on whether the team can communicate with the people you are trying to reach. One option is to utilize translators. Another good strategy is to use short indigenous evangelistic films the team can put on their smartphones. When they meet someone who seems open, they can offer to show that person a short film in their own language. These types of films are available for free download at indigitube.tv in many languages.

If the short-termers speak the language, they can help you sow the gospel seeds in an even more abundant way. Send them out, as Jesus did, in pairs of two or three people to share their testimony, pray for the sick and

look for receptive people who are open to hearing more about Jesus.

While foreigners are good at attracting a crowd, this can be counter-productive in sensitive areas. It may reinforce a negative understanding of the gospel as a "foreigner's religion." We generally discourage open-air and street meetings where dramas, songs and other "shows" attract crowds. This may be appropriate in some places but in many unreached and resistant areas it can cause unhelpful attention. It highlights what you are doing and can even result in unnecessary persecution after the team has gone. Instead, encourage teams to look for ways to have real conversations with people one-on-one or in smaller groups.

3. FINDING PERSONS OF PEACE AND STARTING NEW GROUPS

As they share their testimonies or gospel stories, God may use the team to reveal the Person of Peace in a community. Be sure to train the team in what to do with someone who seems open; how to offer to start a discovery or story group with them, and how to follow up. Then, be ready, after the team goes, to continue to meet with those people.

Three things Short-Term Teams Should Avoid

If you are a field worker, you may want to pre-discuss the following things before welcoming a team. Most teams will look to you to give adequate orientation and they will follow your lead (if you communicate clearly ahead of time.)

I. AVOID DOING ANYTHING THAT WILL NOT BE REPRODUCIBLE

Avoid bringing in evangelism or community development tools that will not be easy to obtain after you leave. Tent crusades, expensive bands and outside equipment are all a risk to the movement's DNA.

2. AVOID FUNDING PROJECTS WITH OUTSIDE MONEY

It has become very popular for outside teams to fund projects like buildings, wells, clinics, etc. While you may have good intentions, these kinds of projects often create an unhealthy dependency rather than local ownership. It hampers sustainability and reproducibility in the future. If, after you go,

those things cannot be carried on by the local people themselves then you may unintentionally be causing harm.

3. AVOID COMING IN AS EXPERTS INSTEAD OF LEARNERS

Many short-term teams come with a God-complex. They believe God has sent them to “save the heathens” or something equivalent to that. As the team prepares, be sure to help those coming to see themselves not as saviors, but as learners and guests in a new environment.

Four Key Ways That Teams Can Prepare

Jean Johnson, who contributes to this magazine and is the Director of Five Stones Global, has an excellent book called *Go Light! Go Local! A Conscientious Approach to Short-Term Missions* (available on Amazon). This book does a fantastic job of preparing teams who want to work in an effective way. I highly recommend it for a fuller treatment of this important topic. Let me just give you a few things to consider to get you started.

1. COULD YOU LEAVE SOMEONE BEHIND?

Consider either working with someone on the ground who has a DMM vision already, or being prepared to leave people behind to follow up. From the team’s first pre-trip meeting, sow the seed of responding to God’s call to not just go, but to stay (or come back). Make a commitment as a team that if you see a response, someone from among you will stay back to continue to disciple those who come to faith.

2. EMBRACE A LONG-TERM MINDSET AND VISION

You may be short-term in your time commitment, but be long-term in your mindset. See yourself as part of the bigger picture of what God is doing in

that area. Make your contribution to that bigger picture well. Don’t isolate what you are doing from what God did before you came and will be doing after you go.

3. RETURN AND REPEAT

Consider sending several teams over several years to the same location, rather than going to a different place each time. If there is consistency and the same team leaders return for each trip, the team has a much better chance of growing, learning and building strong relationships with the field workers and local people. Ultimately they will have a much better impact.

4. PRACTICE AT HOME FIRST

Be sure to practice DMM activities in your home country first rather than experimenting on people cross-culturally. If the people on your team have never shared their testimony or used an evangelism approach like the 3 Circles in their own city, what makes you think they can do that effectively through a translator? Build into the team’s preparation time opportunities for prayer walks, evangelism and sharing Bible stories in their own context.

Consider Saying “Yes”

« That group of crazy, young, bold foreigners could end up being the catalyst for a breakthrough. »

For those who are wanting to launch Disciple Making Movements, don’t be afraid of short-term teams. You may not want to have them coming every month, but when you have an opportunity to partner with someone who wants to send people short-term, consider saying “yes.” That group of crazy, young, bold foreigners could end up being the catalyst for a breakthrough. As far-fetched as it may sound, God delights in doing just those kinds of things through those who step out in faith and obedience. MF