

Planning Mission Trips that Matter

BY CURT KRUSCHWITZ

Carelessly assembled short-term mission trips may jeopardize long-term ministry and create unhealthy dependencies. But when framed in the context of joining God's mission and used to nurture spiritual growth, they can be of immense value to God's kingdom.

When my father moved to Nigeria to serve as a missionary forty-five years ago, he went through painstaking preparation. The logistics of transatlantic travel were complicated. There were significant financial expenses. He soaked in as much information as he could during a two-month training experience. Perhaps nothing adequately prepared him, though, for saying goodbye to the world he knew and realizing that contact with those he loved would be very limited in the coming years.

Since then, the world has changed tremendously. When I was a twenty-year-old college student, it took me just a few months to raise funds to serve in Kenya with a team of students on a two-week short-term mission (STM) trip. You have probably seen teams like mine in an airport — sporting their gear in backpacks, wearing identical T-shirts, wading in clumps through security lines, and searching for their gate. Sponsoring short-term missions is the biggest trend to hit evangelical churches since Vacation Bible School, and it is growing exponentially. In 1989, an estimated 120,000 North Americans participated in STM trips. By 2003, that number grew to one million. In 2010, an estimated two to three million North Americans traveled internationally on STM trips. Never in history have so many people participated directly in global missions. In fact, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow estimates that today's church member in the United States has a 20-25% likelihood of going on a STM trip.¹ What started as a grassroots endeavor among church youth groups is becoming commonplace in North American churches.



My STM experience in Kenya sparked a sense of calling in my life that led me to move to Western Europe, where I served for several years as a missionary among refugees and asylum seekers. STM's popularity was growing rapidly during that time, and I hosted about a dozen STM teams in Europe.

These experiences with the STM movement were decidedly mixed. On the one hand, STM offered participants many opportunities for personal spiritual formation and for ministry. My own sense of God's calling for my life was expanded after serving for a couple of weeks in Kenya. On top of that, the relationships built by one particular STM team I hosted in Europe were a significant catalyst for a couple of refugees growing deeper in their relationships with Jesus Christ. That team also helped me develop significant rapport with local social workers. On the other hand, some of the other STM teams were not as helpful as they thought. A few well-meaning teams and individuals, in fact, had agendas that could have jeopardized our long-term ministry.

In retrospect, it is not surprising that I had such mixed experiences with STM. For a practice that became so prevalent in churches in the 2000s, there was an astonishing void of scholarship examining the effects of the STM movement. Youth ministers and lay leaders were expected to take church groups on short-term mission trips, even though seminaries and denominations had provided virtually no training on short-term missions.² Furthermore, while churches espoused anecdotal support for the STM trips, little scholarly research on their effectiveness was completed in the early years.

With the increasing clamor around STM in the mid-2000s, however, missiologists began to pay much more attention to the STM movement. They asked critical questions: Could the money spent on costly international airfare be better used if it were sent to local missionaries? Are untrained STM participants actually hurting local ministry through their lack of cultural sensitivity? Does STM focus too much on short-term fixes instead of long-term solutions? Does STM perpetuate patriarchal attitudes among Westerners used to a higher standard of living?

Calvin College sociologist Kurt Ver Beek published some of the first broad-scale, comprehensive research on STM that took into account how both participants and local hosts felt after an STM experience. Ver Beek interviewed 162 North Americans who helped with Christian relief efforts to rebuild Honduran homes after Hurricane Mitch ravished the country in 1998. He also conducted extensive interviews with local Hondurans about their opinions on the STM help. Ver Beek found that North Americans spent about \$30,000 per rebuilt home in Honduras, while a local organization rebuilt homes for \$2,000 each. Furthermore, the North American-built homes were no more helpful than the locally-built ones. Many of the Hondurans in the study admitted that it made more financial sense for the North Americans to send money to local Hondurans to rebuild homes. Still, the Hondu-

rans were reticent to discourage STM trips. When pressed to explain the value of STM teams, many of them did not remember the STM participants for the houses they built as much as the relationships they started. In fact, most of them valued the relationships they built with STM participants more than the houses they built. "The best thing was the friendship we had with the group," said one Honduran woman, who named her daughter "Laura Michelle" after two of the North American STM participants.³

Other missiologists uncovered a host of critiques from local churches hosting STM teams. For instance, Edwin Zehner highlighted an East African church leader, who wished to remain anonymous, who preferred not to receive STM teams of American college students in his hometown. In this church leader's experience, STM teams had unrealistic expectations for the trip. STM teams often focused on "bottom-line, results-oriented action," he said. In addition, STM team members regularly harbored the notion "that a person who has traveled far to 'provide help' or 'do mission(s)' should be expected to do something substantial for the people he or she has come to serve." This same church leader compared STM teams to special military forces who suppose "that they can engage the people instantly, accomplish their 'mission' and 'pull out' despite their lack of expertise in the foreign setting."⁴ Caroline Baar found that indigenous church leaders in Rwanda and Ghana wished STM participants would focus less on large projects and instead invest time in building relationships with locals, learning about the host culture.⁵ Many local churches and missionaries around the world have agreed that STM teams are most helpful when they are less task-oriented and more focused on building relationships with locals and learning about God's work in a specific location.

Steven Corbett and Brian Fikkert have identified further pitfalls of North American STM: perpetuating a system of paternalism, creating dependency, and stunting long-term growth within the host communities.⁶

Given this critical research on STM, it is not surprising that many missiologists and church leaders have asked, "Is STM worth it?" Yet, most continue to believe there is a place for STM because the spiritual formation for both participants and hosts as they take time to worship, serve, and learn together can be life-changing. Anthropologist Brian Howell sums up this positive perspective well:

We should not abandon international travel, nor should we be less generous with our resources. But if we would spend less time building walls, painting houses, or digging ditches, we could spend our time learning how the problems there are part of our problems here. These trips should serve to teach us how we are bound up together, in our economics, in our politics, and most importantly, in Christ.⁷



When congregations feel called to participate in STM, how do they serve responsibly? Several recent resources can help them plan better trips. James E. Plueddemann's *Leading across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009) addresses the importance of cultural understanding amidst different culturally-based leadership models utilized across the globe, and provides insightful tips

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for developing healthy cross-cultural relationships. David A. Livermore's *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006) uncovers cultural misunderstandings that STM team members often unconsciously develop in their attitudes towards service, poverty, and sharing their faith. In *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself*

(Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012 [2009]), Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert suggest helpful models for partnerships that avoid creating dependencies and that minimize paternalism. More recently, Corbett and Fikkert have published *Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: Participants Guide [and Leaders Guide]* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), books with free online video content that guide STM teams to prepare for their experience.

These resources agree that the healthiest form of STM happens when participants develop relationships with local Christians, learning and worshiping and serving together. According to David Livermore, "The single most important thing that differentiates the 'good' from the 'bad' short-term missions is the leadership's objective."⁸ STM leaders in churches and Christian organizations must discern how they can best orient a trip toward these ends.

At First Baptist Church, Waco, this discernment led us to reframe the traditional "mission trips" that we have led since the 1990s. In fact, we no longer call our out-of-town missional efforts "mission trips"; instead, we call them "Mission Formation Experiences" to more accurately describe the primary objective of these trips: spiritual formation and service together.



Throughout the Bible, kingdom service and spiritual growth often go hand-in-hand. Time after time, God uses engagement with the world as a

catalyst for spiritual growth among God's people. Spiritual formation among God's followers in the Bible does not happen in formal classroom settings. Instead, it happens as Israelites and Christ's disciples are led to engage the world and to reflect on their real-life experiences in light of their faith. In other words, as God's people engage their neighbors in God's name, God uses those experiences to form them.

Consider the Israelites who were enslaved to the Egyptians for years. After Moses led them out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai, God points to their experience as oppressed outsiders to teach them how they should treat those on the margins: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). God employs the people's experience as sojourners in the wilderness to transform them. No longer is Israel to live as an inwardly focused clan; instead, God uses Israel's experience to shape them more into the people God created them to be.

Jesus likewise uses his followers' experiences as teaching points to form them more into his image. He sends out the seventy (or seventy-two) "ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he himself intended to go" with instructions for how to engage the people they encounter (Luke 10:1-16). When he disciples return, they are giddy with excitement over the power they had over demons. "Do not rejoice...that the spirits submit to you," Jesus replies, "but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (10:20). In other words, Jesus uses their experiences to form them into the people God created them to be. This pattern runs throughout both the Old and New Testament: God's followers are sent into the world, and through their experience engaging in God's mission they develop a deeper understanding of God, the world, and their calling in it.

My research among STM participants at FBC Waco suggests this same pattern of spiritual formation through mission happens today. Participants often report spiritual growth and deeper understanding of their vocation from their participation in Mission Formation Experiences. To some extent, that results from how we set up the experiences: we shift the focus away from *what we can do* to help our hosts to *how God can form us and our hosts* as we serve God together. We are joining God's mission around the world, trusting that as we serve in God's name, God's Spirit will form our hosts and our team more into God's image.



Whereas the former mission trips at FBC Waco typically were one- or two-week experiences, the Mission Formation Experience is a commitment that lasts for months. Church leadership guides the team through three key phases of the experience: the pre-trip meeting, the nightly debriefing during the trip, and post-trip reflection gatherings. Each phase plays an important role in the formation experience. Like Livermore suggested, we have seen

that the way the trip leader leads the participants through these phases determines the success of the experience. As a result, we have identified several key things the trip leader can do before, during, and after the trip to create a team atmosphere conducive to healthy ministry and spiritual growth.

During the pre-trip phase, the leader's main responsibility is to reframe the way participants think about the trip. So often, the obvious disparity in

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material wealth between the sending church and the hosts can unconsciously perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and a sense of superiority among the mission team. Therefore, it is vital for the trip leader to reframe the trip in the context of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. We educate our team about the grand narrative in Scripture of God's journey to rescue humanity and redeem God's creation. Christopher J. H. Wright's *Mission of God: Unlocking the*

Bible's Grand Narrative (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) and Lesslie Newbigin's *A Walk through the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999) are great resources for this. We encourage participants to consider what God is already doing in our host community and ways God might be calling us to participate in that. In other words, we subtly shift the focus from what we can offer to how we can join what God is doing. More importantly and beyond the immediate purposes of the trip, we encourage participants to think about ways their lives can fit into God's grand mission to rescue humanity and redeem the world. Thinking about the trip in terms of joining God's work helps combat the inevitable "us" versus "them" sentiments that easily develop among participants.

During the cross-cultural experience itself, the leader's main responsibility is to help the team reflect scripturally and theologically on what they are experiencing. For many team members, there seems to be a heightened alertness to God's activity in their lives while they are serving in STM. It makes sense: when else are they gathering to learn, pray, worship, and serve in a community for several days in a row? The nightly reflection time takes advantage of this heightened awareness of God's presence and offers participants the opportunity to consider how God may be forming them spiritually. We have developed a curriculum that focuses each night on several verses from Luke 10, which according to one scholar, may have functioned as a "handbook on missions for early Christians."⁹ In this chapter

Jesus highlights the interrelated roles of prayer, community, hospitality, and courage in witness. We also spend thirty minutes to an hour each evening processing our day's experience as a group.

Over the years, these evening sessions have grown to become one of our team members' favorite times of the day. Usually, just a question or two will suffice to get the conversation going: How did you see God working today? What did you learn about God, yourself, or humankind today? What is God calling you to do next? Participants articulate the ways they have seen God moving. We have found that this sort of contemplation is contagious! After a recent trip to Guatemala, many team members remarked how the nightly reflection times were catalysts for their spiritual growth. One of them said, "I love hearing stories about what God's doing, because then it makes me think...maybe God's trying to show me something, too, and maybe I should look for something like that."¹⁰ As participants hear from their peers how God is working in their lives and in the lives of our hosts, it inspires them to consider how God may be working in their own lives.

Because participants process their experiences through their study in Luke 10 each day, the Mission Formation Experience becomes a "lab" where participants learn new ways to study Scripture and look for its truth in their daily lives. Some participants have reported that the daily reflection times were catalysts for a deeper pattern on Bible reading, prayer, and service when they returned home.¹¹

After the cross-cultural experience concludes, we offer opportunities for team members to gather together again back in Waco. In these meetings, we remember ways that we saw God work during our experience, we celebrate what God has done, and we spur one another to integrate that experience into our daily lives. To each post-trip meeting participants bring a picture that reminds them of how God worked, bring something that reminds them of a spiritual lesson they learned, or bring a written statement about how their life fits into God's mission here at home. As participants remember how God worked in their lives during the Mission Formation Experience, they often consider how that same God invites them to serve, study, and follow God in their hometown. It is our hope that the travel portion of the Mission Formation Experience will become a vehicle for on-going spiritual growth and theological reflection at home.



A hundred years ago, it would have been hard to fathom that North America alone would send out two to three million Christians on short-term mission trips every year. Critics have rightly identified some of the challenges that come from unexamined participation in the movement. Cultural insensitivity, paternalism, and an insistence on results-oriented tasks can do more harm than good. At the same time, missiologists have observed the spiritual

formation and ministry that occurs for both participants and hosts in STM.

A short-term mission trip has the potential to be of enormous value. Like a fire that can be used to destroy or to refine, it must be treated with great caution and care. Short-term mission trips hastily thrown together have the potential to jeopardize long-term ministry and create dependencies. But when they are framed within the context of joining God's mission and utilized to nurture the growth that happens when individuals leave their comfort zones, they can be of immense value to God's kingdom. It is up to us to make sure they are done well.

NOTES

1 Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, with Katie Casselberry, *Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: A Leader's Guide* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 17.

2 Robert Priest, Terry Dischinger, Steve Rasmussen, and C. M. Brown, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology: An International Review* 34:4 (October 2006), 431-450, here citing 434.

3 Kurt Alan Ver Beek, "The Impact of Short-Term Missions: A Case Study of House Construction in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch," *Missiology: An International Review* 34:4 (October 2006), 477-492.

4 Edward Zehner, "Short-Term Missions: Toward a More Field-Oriented Model," *Missiology: An International Review* 34:4 (October 2006), 509-521, here citing 512.

5 *Ibid.*, 511.

6 See especially chapter 2, "Do Unto Others" – Counting the Costs of STMs," in Corbett and Fikkert, *Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions*, 29-44.

7 Brian M. Howell, David Livermore, and Robert J. Priest, "Should Churches Abandon Travel-Intensive Short-Term Missions in Favor of Local Projects?" *Christianity Today* 56:6 (June 25, 2012), 60 ff., available online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/june/short-term-missions.html (accessed June 12, 2016).

8 *Ibid.*, 61.

9 David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Volume 3, edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 431.

10 William Curtis Kruschwitz, "Mission Formation Experiences: Reframing Short-Term Mission Trips for Holistic Spiritual Formation" (doctor of ministry thesis, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, 2014), 95.

11 *Ibid.*, 72, 98.



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