

# Resources for Short-Term Missions

BY TYLER GARRARD

**Can a short-term mission trip be meaningful for participants and hosts, and be fun? The books reviewed here address that tension. They consider the how and the why of trips, explore issues with cross-cultural travel, and suggest structural changes to the common approach toward short-term missions.**

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**T**he youth group in the church I grew up in looked forward to the mission trip every year. On the wall in the game room there was a mural map of the United States with pictures highlighting the places the church had been – Boston, Missoula, and Seattle to name a few. Every fourth year the group went on a “big” trip, once to Denmark and another time to Greece. I do not remember what work was done on these trips, but probably it was some version of backyard Bible clubs or evangelism. I remember being told that on the last night of the trip everyone would cry because of how close they had gotten. By the time I was able to go on mission trips, a new youth minister had come and while the locations were not as exotic, the model was basically the same. A trip each year, some type of service project, some type of vacation.

At the church where I serve now, I am in the process of planning a short-term mission for the summer. I feel acutely the tension between the trip being meaningful, both for those who go and those we are with while there, and the trip being fun. The four books reviewed here help to address that tension. They consider the how and the why of trips, explore issues with cross-cultural travel, and suggest structural changes to the common approach toward short-term missions.



*Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World* by Don C. Richter (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2008, 176 pp., \$17.00) is the more theologically orientated of the four. As with his previous book (with Dorothy Bass), *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (2002), there are not a lot of “practical” suggestions in *Mission Trips that Matter*. The book is designed as a guide for incorporating the whole body into the experience of travel and short-term missions. It is an invitation to “move beyond checklists to ponder what deeper wisdom the Spirit is whispering as we get our immunization shots, pack our bag, fill our water bottles, put on our walking shoes, strap on our cameras, and pull out our maps” (19).

In the first part of the book Richter considers different reasons why churches or groups go on mission trips. He offers space for reflection by group leaders regarding their own gifts and limits as leaders. Preparing to go on a trip can be an endless checking-off of lists; Richter provides questions that help leaders move beyond those checklists, from the *how* of the trip to the *why* of the trip. (But never fear: a later chapter in Part III, “Resources for the Road,” does include a list of workbooks and guides that would be helpful in preparing a trip.) Here Richter sees missions as a form of pilgrimage and wonders how such a perspective might combat some of the more troubling reasons churches choose to go.

Part II is the heart of the book, reflecting on how the whole body might be considered within the context of a mission trip. Chapters entitled “Attentive Eyes,” “Attuned Ears,” “Sturdy Backs,” “Beautiful Feet,” “Open Hands,” “Courageous Lips,” and “Conspiring Noses” lead readers to ask, how does being aware of our body help us to be more present and open to the people we are serving? Richter wants pilgrims not only to think theologically about the *why* of their trip, but to connect that *why* with the physical realities of the places they will go. In that sense, maybe it is a very practical book after all.



*Helping without Hurting in Short-Term Missions: Leader’s Guide* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, with Katie Casselberry (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014, 256 pp., \$14.99), is the most practically useful of the four books. As the title suggests, this book is a guide for those preparing to lead a short-term mission (STM) trip. The first part of the *Leader’s Guide* offers a framework for how to think about short-term missions and the second part suggests how to implement it.

Because STM trips usually intend to help persons in need, the framework suggested by Corbett and Fikkert centers on a particular understanding of poverty and how its alleviation relates to the lives of participants before and after the trip. They argue that since “poverty alleviation is a long-term process of reconciliation, not a momentary provision of material

good, a standalone, two-week STM trip cannot significantly and directly contribute to poverty alleviation” (22). Therefore, the model STM trip is one that “supports the work God is already doing in a community, that avoids hurting those we are trying to help, and that leads to transformative engagement” (23). They have in mind the transformation of trip participants through long-term engagement with the problems of poverty. Just as poverty is not something that can be alleviated in a two-week trip, genuine transformation takes time. Corbett and Fikkert propose an STM model that begins preparing participants long before the departure date for the trip and continues to guide their transformation after the return.

To implement such a trip is no easy task, but the second half of *Helping without Hurting* is dedicated to outlining how to do it. The first thing Corbett and Fikkert recommend is to carefully build partnerships. They encourage groups to work through an intermediary organization that already has an established relationship with a community in need. Other practical suggestions focus on the language used to describe the trip (Chapter 6), building the team (Chapter 7), training the team members (Chapter 8), and being prepared to follow-up with them after the trip (Chapter 9).

Also included in the book is a copy of the companion volume, the *Participant's Guide*, and free online access to a series of eight videos to spark group discussions. It should be noted that *Helping without Hurting* assumes at least some familiarity with Corbett and Fikkert's earlier work, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself*, new edition (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012 [2009], 288 pp., \$15.99). That being said, while I was only familiar with that book in name, I still found *Helping without Hurting* to be useful and thought provoking. Its brief explanation of some of the issues confronting short-term missions and suggestion that trips should emphasize the participants' presence with over their helping the hosts provide some valuable guidelines to STM leaders.



*Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* by Brian M. Howell (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012, 256 pp., \$24.00) is the “scientific” book of this group. Howell is an anthropologist at Wheaton College and the subtitle for his book is a clear sign that it is a little more work to get through than the above two books. It is well written, but does require more sustained attention. Whereas *Mission Trips that Matter* and *Helping without Hurting* go well together as books to read when preparing for a trip, Howell's *Short-Term Mission* would be most useful in an interlude between trips for a group restructuring their approach to mission or as part of a larger investigation into short-term missions.

Howell's intent is to show how we create the stories we tell about the trips we take, how we use those stories to understand the trips, and how

they become so important in participants' religious lives. After outlining his own theoretical approach, he provides his own definition of "short-term mission." In defining this complicated term, he discusses both pilgrimage and tourism, but in the end he says STM is a "unique phenomenon referencing a unique social encounter" (40). Howell explores the development of short-term missions (involving laypeople, especially youth, on a trip roughly the length of a vacation) from its earlier roots in missions (featuring ordained adults on life-long projects). It is in this shift that Howell sees the language emerging that shapes the narratives we tell today.

The third part of the book is the study of Howell's trip with Central Wheaton Church to the Dominican Republic. He looks at how the wider American evangelical culture influenced team members' interpretations of their experiences during the trip and coming home. Chapter titles "Pour Out Your Soul" and "Of Course You Always Go Close to God on a Mission Trip" reflect the kinds of narratives trip-goers tell of these stages, respectively. In the final part of the book, Howell discusses the narratives within the context of theology and missions as a way of thinking about how STMs might be restructured through "cultural change."

Of the four authors, Howell is the one who most clearly advocates for significant change in the approach to short-term missions. The other authors offer practical suggestions—such as changing language in regard to the trip, building relationships with hosts, and focusing on the why of a trip—but Howell thinks "it is not enough to change our language (culture is not only rhetoric) and it is not enough to change our practices" (198). Instead, he calls for structural and institutional change. Short-term missions should continue but those sending STM teams must "consider reform in light of the larger economic, institutional and cultural context of their travel" (198).



*Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing It Right!* Evangelical Missiological Society Series, 16, edited by Robert J. Priest (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012 [2008], 655 pp., \$16.99), is by far the longest book reviewed here. I am not sure if the exclamation point at the end of the title signals that doing it right is exciting, or is just a little forced cheerfulness for the weighty tome the contributors have produced. This anthology offers a variety of authors: six are women, two are Chinese, one is Korean, and one is Peruvian. Nevertheless, the writers mostly come from a small selection of Chicago-area schools with distinctive theological commitments (Wheaton, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Moody Bible Institute), and so the range of perspectives is limited in other ways.

The book is structured in six sections. The first part explores the move from long-term missions to short-term. The second and third parts examine relationships with the "other" and formation of partnerships. The fourth

deals with specialized trips (for example, for medical practitioners or business persons), and the fifth, which is “alone worth the price of the book,” according to Priest, looks at legal issues in regard to missions. The last section focuses on the impact of short-term missions on participants. This book is probably best used as a companion to one of the other books. For instance if you are a leader working through *Helping without Hurting*, it might be good to read Miriam Adeney’s essay “The Myth of Blank Slate” or C. M. Brown’s “Friendship Is Forever: Congregation to Congregation Relationships.” If you are reading *Mission Trips that Matter*, perhaps read Richard Slimbach’s “The Mindful Missioner” to fill out your approach to a trip.



In the *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth notes that some missionaries see themselves as people with flashlights going into the dark places of the world and shining the light. What they do not realize, he says, is that the light is already there. That is an important insight to remember when we become anxious about planning the perfect mission, either short- or long-term, to bear witness to the light.

Each of the books reviewed here expresses a desire to do a short-term mission trip right, to have a trip that matters, or (at least) to have a trip that does no harm. Yet they illustrate that despite the best of intentions, it is not always possible to do a trip “right,” to say how a trip matters or to whom it matters, and to do no harm. Part of the reason for this is cultural and structural, part is the difficulty of breaking poor habits, and part is because trips involve working with and for people with complex motives and personal limitations.

So, we should be realistic. Reading these books will not make our trip totally successful in any of those ways, but they can help us as we plan, lead, or participate in a short-term mission trip. They will not show us how to do everything right, but can make us aware of the light that surrounds and sustains us, wherever we go, even to the very ends of the earth.

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