



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 Planning Mission Trips that Matter  
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 47-54)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Enroute to Home  
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 79-83)
- 📖 Resources for Short-Term Missions  
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 84-88)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Planning Mission Trips that Matter

Carelessly assembled short-term mission trips jeopardize long-term ministry and create unhealthy dependencies. But 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.

### Prayer

No matter where we are, where we are going, or what we are doing, we know that we find our help in you, our Lord.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.**

Your promise holds for the future and for eternity, and we praise and thank you for that.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay. Amen.**

### Scripture Reading: Luke 10:1-16

### Meditation†

Short-term missions have become a part of the fabric of our contemporary religious and social landscapes.... I believe the phenomenon emerges from a deep search for meaning arising out of a discontent with American culture and postindustrial capitalism. We seem to have a collective desire to do something meaningful in a way that doesn't seem possible in our day-to-day lives. This yearning has come together with cheap and accessible transportation and an awareness of conditions elsewhere in the world, facilitated by media and the immediacy of the news cycle. It emerges from an admirable impulse to help, to give, to sacrifice, for the well-being of others.

*Laurie Occhipinti*

### Reflection

"Throughout the Bible, kingdom service and spiritual growth often go hand-in-hand," Curt Kruschwitz notes. "Spiritual formation... 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."

This biblical pattern of spiritual formation through mission may happen today through the short-term mission (STM) trips which are increasingly popular in congregations. But such trips must avoid these common pitfalls identified by researchers:

- ▶ hurting the established local ministry due to STM participants' lack of cultural sensitivity
- ▶ perpetuating patriarchal attitudes among Westerners used to a higher standard of living
- ▶ wasting financial resources that could be better used by the host communities
- ▶ having unrealistic expectations due to a "bottom-line, results-oriented" approach
- ▶ focusing on short-term fixes instead of long-term solutions
- ▶ creating dependency and stunting long-term growth within the host communities



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Given all these pitfalls, Kruschwitz says “it is not surprising that many missiologists and church leaders have asked, ‘Is STM worth it?’” Yet he and other researchers are optimistic that better prepared STM teams can avoid or mitigate these problems.

He begins by naming the trips “Mission Formation Experiences” in order to “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.” And instead of a more typical one- or two-week experience, participants commit to a months-long process of pre-trip meetings, nightly debriefings during the trip, and post-trip reflection gatherings.

In the pre-trip phase, leaders focus on “what God is already doing in our host’s community” rather than “what we can offer.” Kruschwitz explains, “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’ vs. ‘them’ sentiments that easily develop among participants.”

Nightly sessions during the trip help participants reflect scripturally and theologically on their “heightened alertness to God’s activity in their lives.” A curriculum based on Luke 10 “highlights the interrelated roles of prayer, community, hospitality, and courage in witness.” Questions like “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?” lead participants to study Scripture more carefully and relate its truths to their lives, both on the trip and when they return home.

At each post-trip gathering, participants share “a picture that reminds them of how God worked, something that reminds them of a spiritual lesson they learned, or a written statement about how their life fits into God’s mission.” Kruschwitz observes, “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.”

### Study Questions

1. Why do you think short-term mission (STM) experiences have become so popular in recent years?
2. Under what conditions, according to Curt Kruschwitz, can STM experiences be of immense value to God’s kingdom? How can they be valuable to the spiritual growth of both participants and members of the host communities?
3. Discuss the common pitfalls of STM trips. Do these problems result from leaders and participants’ motivations, lack of preparation, cultural differences from host communities, or from some other cause?
4. Evaluate your experiences on STM trips in light of these values and pitfalls. What would you do differently next time?
5. For Matthew Waller, how have experiences as a missionary kid, STM trip participant, and agricultural missionary been valuable in his current lifework as a journalist?

### Departing Hymn: “While on the Long Emmaus Road” (vv. 1, 2, 4, and 5)

† Laurie A. Occhipinti, *Making a Difference in a Globalized World: Short-term Missions that Work* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 4-5.

# Planning Mission Trips that Matter

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To examine the spiritual value of short-term mission (STM) experiences for participants and host communities.
2. To identify some of the common pitfalls of STM experiences.
3. To consider how to carefully plan and execute STM experiences in order to avoid or mitigate the common pitfalls.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Traveling Well (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

"When my father moved to Nigeria to serve as a missionary in 1968, 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. What started as a grassroots endeavor among church youth groups is becoming commonplace in North American churches." (*Traveling Well*, p. 47)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 10:1-16 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

The short-term mission (STM) trip is the newest and most popular of the specifically Christian forms of travel. This study reviews the leading criticisms of STM trips and offers a model for avoiding or mitigating the most common pitfalls of these trips. The spiritual value of STM travel, according to Curt Kruschwitz, turns out to have much in common with pilgrimage and spiritual retreat, two much older Christian forms of traveling well.

The books reviewed in Tyler Garrard's *Resources for Short-Term Missions* can help members as they plan, lead, or participate in their next STM experience.

## Study Questions

1. STM trips can be fun and safe ways of traveling with others – church friends, family members, or professionals with common skills and interests – to interesting (and sometimes exotic) destinations and interacting with the people who live there. Participants may form lasting spiritual friendships with one another, career missionaries, or members of the host communities. The cost of long-distance travel has decreased in recent years, and sending congregations, host communities, and others may subsidize these service-oriented trips.

But STM trips are more than fun and relatively inexpensive ways to travel. Christians are increasingly aware of spiritual, financial, and social needs in the world (through reports in the media or from friends who travel, or their first-hand experience), and STM trips appeal to their desire to make a difference, or (in Laurie Occhipinti's words) "to do something meaningful in a way that doesn't seem possible in our day-to-day lives."

2. Curt Kruschwitz highlights several values of STM experiences. First, participants may have "a heightened alertness to God's activity in their lives" as they gather "to learn, pray, worship, and serve in a community for several days in a row." The trip may spark a clarifying call to some form of ministry when they return home. Second, participants may form lasting spiritual friendships with one another, a career missionary, or members of the host community. Third, they may learn more about the brokenness of the world, or (in anthropologists Brian Howell's words) "how the problems there are part of our problems here...how we are bound up together, in our economics, in our politics, and most importantly, in Christ." Fourth, they may develop habits of theological reflection on their daily experience and Bible study that carryover to their lives when they return. These facets of spiritual growth may accrue to the members of host communities as well.
3. Six pitfalls are listed in the study guide. Form small groups to discuss them individually or to focus on a few pitfalls that seem most salient in your ministry situation. "It is not always possible to do a trip 'right,'" Tyler Garrard warns in *Resources for Short-Term Missions*. "Part of the reason for this is cultural and structural, part is the difficulty of breaking habits, and part is because trips involve working with and for people with complex motives and personal limitations." Consider how each pitfall might have these various causes.
4. Invite members to reflect on their STM experiences. Were they of lasting spiritual value? Did they suffer some of these problems? Evaluate a recent STM trip that members shared in the congregation. How would you increase its long-term spiritual value for participants and host community? How would you avoid or mitigate the pitfalls you experienced? Kruschwitz describes how his congregation redesigned their Mission Formation Experiences. Consider how aspects of that redesign could be adapted to improve your STM experience.
5. "One of the hazards for me personally in mission-based travel," Waller admits, is focusing on a task and blocking everything else out. He made some friends along the way. But the greatest value was learning to respond to "a cultural practice or way of life which conflicts with one's core principles." His approach is "simple, even if difficult at times: treat people respectfully, lovingly ask questions, present one's own viewpoint, and move forward on common ground. When this amounts to a single conversation on a plane or a bus or over coffee, it feels manageable, but it is harder to do this every day in interaction with neighbors, coworkers, and friends. It is a challenge to hold tight for a conflict-averse, people-pleaser like myself. Yet it is a struggle that the church of pilgrim-travelers cannot avoid."

## Departing Hymn

"While on the Long Emmaus Road" is on pp. 55-57 of *Traveling Well*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.