



# Narrative, Communion, and Development

Transformational  
Short-term Missions

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Standing on the second story of a school building, Tom Schuler looked out over the slum. Before him, a sea of clapboard shacks stretched to the horizon. He's come here every year for ten years, serving with the Huduma Church in the Kawangware slum of Nairobi, Kenya. He's seen a lot here, but on this day something new caught his eye. The school day had just ended. Eight hundred children in blue school uniforms were streaming into the narrow alleys returning home. Like blue-clad messengers, they fanned out, carrying their day's lessons and stories of the God who loves them.

The image reminds me of Ezekiel's vision of the river of life (Ezek. 47:1–12). As the river flows out from the Temple of God it gets deeper and wider, bringing life and healing to all in its path. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37 NIV). Wherever the people of God dwell, they become like the river: flowing into the world bringing life, healing, and hope.

God resides in those blue-uniformed children going home every night in the Kawangware slum. But it has not always been so. Twelve years ago there were no children in blue school uniforms and no school building from which you could view the squalid landscape. There was no Huduma Church, no medical clinic, no HIV/AIDS education and care for slum dwellers, no vocational-training programs, no relief assistance for the most destitute, and no institute for pastors learning to serve in the slums of Nairobi.

But there was a local man and his wife with a dream and a few friends from North America willing to serve with them. Tom Schuler and others from Fellowship Bible Church of Roswell, Georgia were among the first to come alongside David and Ann Kitonga, founders of Africa Equip Ministry, a Kenya-based ministry of outreach and leadership development.

There are two stories to tell here. One is the story of a local ministry, the church they planted, and the many ways they struggle to do justice and dwell with God in the heart of a slum. The other is a story of ordinary North American Christians trying to be the people of God in the global neighborhood.

Similar stories are played out around the world as an estimated 1.5 million U.S. Christians travel on short-term mission trips each year — and the number is growing.<sup>1</sup> The short-term mission movement is redefining North American missions. But to what end? What is the promise of short-term mission, and is it delivering?

A growing body of research suggests short-term missions are producing far less than what we hoped for and some costly unintended consequences.<sup>2</sup> In brief, to borrow a line from Miriam Adeney, associate professor of global and urban ministries at Seattle Pacific University, short-term mission is beginning to look a lot like "loving your neighbor while using her."<sup>3</sup>

Like all of God's gifts, short-term mission is an opportunity that requires stewardship. The people of God may make the most of it or not. The movement may cultivate authentic fellowship in the gospel or result in little more than tourism.

How can we make the most of it? The answer lies not in short-term excursions but in long-term commitments as members of God's extended family (Eph 2:19–22). If we are to seize the promise of short-term mission, it must be made subordinate to and at the service of long-term relationships in the work of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this we must think narrative instead of event, pursue communion above expediency, and achieve development not charity.

## Think Narrative Instead of Event

God is writing His story, and He invites us to write it with Him. David and Tom are contributing authors to the story God is writing in the Kawangware slum. David and Tom's own stories are intertwining narratives of the pilgrimage of faith. Each has his own story, but it would be difficult for Tom to talk about his spiritual journey without referencing his experiences in Kawangware. Similarly, David cannot reminisce about the Huduma Church without giving thanks for Tom and others from Fellowship Bible Church.

When Tom watched the children go home that night, he was looking at ten years of sacrifice, frustration, and joy. And his story had become part of their story. He would forever be a part of the story of redemption in Kawangware. This is how we become God's missionary people: by joining Christ in the story line of other's lives.

When John the Baptist asked for proof that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus said, "Go back and tell John what's going on: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side" (Matt. 11:4–6 MSG). I can imagine John the Baptist raised his arms to heaven and cried, "Yes!" This is the grand narrative that makes sense of life. God is reconciling the world to himself, and we are invited to join Him.

But here's the problem. It takes time. The story is written across time, not in isolated outings or one-time excursions. Time is the space where characters develop, the plot thickens, and drama unfolds. Without time, all we have are sound bites, overstatement, and hyperbole. Without time, love is reduced to postcard sentiments. Time as continuous involvement in the things that matter to God is how He shapes us into the image of Christ. Time is what Tom Schuler gave the children of Kawangware.

## The Problem with Isolated Outings

Unfortunately, time is the missing element in short-term missions. It's the lack of time to discover new perspectives in the context of relationships that reinforces stereotypes of other cultures. It's the lack of time to encounter the complexities of poverty that perpetuates misperceptions about the poor. It's the

lack of time to actually borrow the discomfort of others that feeds the quick-fix mentality.

If a lack of time is the fundamental flaw of short-term missions, then the essential remedy is more time. But how do you put time into something designed to be short? The answer is to put short-term missions into the service of long-term relationships.

How does that work? To claim the promise of short-term missions, we must first ensure they become episodes in a narrative — short stories in the long story of transformation among a specific people in a specific place. The answer is accomplished through long-term mission partnerships.

## Pursue Communion Above Expediency

Like many Americans, I am pragmatic. I have a practical, matter-of-fact way of approaching situations and solving problems. Most short-term missions are also pragmatic, and why not? Images of war, refugees, malnourished children, and disaster victims fill the senses of conscientious people. Human tragedy is everywhere. Responsible Christians want to do something, and so they should. As a matter of fact, part of the momentum of the short-term mission movement is the desire to **do something**, to relieve suffering and halt injustice.

When Jesus wanted to illustrate His command to “love your neighbor,” He told the story of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan is exemplary because he did something. His action is all the more memorable because, by contrast, the self-righteous did nothing. To love your neighbor is to **do something** for his benefit.

It should come as no surprise then that the prevailing concept of mission is pragmatic. Christians want to do something. They want to be more than donors. They want to be actors, agents of change and ministers of reconciliation.

The mission of the church is practical, but as Simon Chan, professor of systematic theology at Trinity Theological College in Singapore, reminds us, “communion is the ultimate end, not mission.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Weakness of Pragmatism

Pragmatism, however, as the **basis** of mission is inadequate at best and dangerous at its worst. At a minimum, pragmatism leads to two dangerous distractions.

First, pragmatism places too much emphasis on human need. A focus on needs can be misleading because, ultimately, human need is insatiable. Take slavery for example. Slavery was officially abolished worldwide in 1927, yet it continues to thrive. According to the U.S. State Department, each year an estimated 800,000 men, women, and children are trafficked across international borders.<sup>6</sup> That

says nothing of the thousands of women and children trafficked within their own countries.

Slavery is one evil that creates an untold number of human needs. We could also speak of HIV/AIDS, malaria, drought, hunger, and ignorance. All have the power to devastate individuals, communities, and nations.

You get the picture. Human need is insatiable and will not be fully satisfied until the consummation of the kingdom of God. If your only source of direction is human need, you will never fully succeed.

Second, pragmatism tends to pull people in different directions. As a compass is attracted to the earth's center of gravity, pragmatism is drawn to the gravitational force of human need. Without a greater center of gravity, human needs pull people in different directions as each need vies for satisfaction.

## The Strength of Communion

That's where communion comes in. God in His wisdom does not charge believers with righting every wrong and healing every disease. Believers are called to communion with God and one another and to bear witness in word and deed to God's saving work in Jesus.

Jesus prayed that His disciples would be one as He and the Father are one **so that** the world may believe (John 17). Jesus believes the most powerful testimony about Him arises from our communion with Him and with one another. This is what makes communion superior to pragmatism. Communion with the Holy Trinity is the source of mission, the means of mission, and the hope of mission.

## Communion: the Source of Mission

It is from communion with God and one another that we get our identity and mission. The link between identity and mission shows up in the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. The Bible says, "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God" (John 13:3–4 NIV). The passage goes on to describe Jesus washing the disciples' feet as a symbolic act of servanthood. Jesus' ability to serve was defined by His identity, His connection with God the Father, and His reason for being on Earth. Jesus knew who He was. He knew the Father had sent Him, and He knew why. The wealth and clarity of His identity and purpose moved Him to serve and pour himself out for the benefit of others.

Jesus' example reveals that to serve God is not merely to do good and meet human needs. It has a center of gravity, namely, the will of God in salvation history. Knowing one's identity and mission makes it possible to stay on purpose with God while embracing all sorts of tragic human needs. Communion, not pragmatism, defines the believer's identity and mission.

## Communion: the Means of Mission

The fundamental reality in the people of God is Christ, not our ability to *do something*. Christ is the locus of the new creation and the power of regeneration.

Communion is the means of mission because it is our faith-union with Christ that propels us into acts of mercy, justice, and love. This union with Christ bestows the Holy Spirit, who alone is the energy of mission, not our intelligence, technology, or money.

When it comes to creating enduring life change and social transformation, Christ is a better answer. Communion with God is a better method. Better technology will not transform society. Science will not prevent war, promote justice, and create prosperity. Only communion with the triune God transforms people from hatred, discord, jealousy, and selfish ambition to people of peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. Communion, not pragmatism, gives the strength to change lives and announce the kingdom of God.

## Communion: the Hope of Mission

Communion with God is where it all leads: to proclaim the excellencies of God (1 Peter 2:5–9; Titus 2:14; Isa. 43:21). The author and artist Corita Kent is credited with the phrase, “Hope is the memory of the future.” The apostle John gave us the most sacred memory of the future.

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (Rev. 21:2–5 NIV)

Communion, not pragmatism, bestows the most compelling memory of the future.

## Signs of God’s Reign on Earth

Communion with God and one another, not human need or even compassion, is the ground of mission. Mission is more than doing something.

What does this mean to short-term missions? It means that in communion we have all the elements necessary to take hold of the promise of short-term missions. Through communion we find who we are and what God invites us to do. Through communion we have the power to bear one another’s burdens and to sacrifice for the benefit of others. Through communion we gain the ability to hope and labor for

the new creation. These things make us God's missionary people.

If we hope to capture the real promise of short-term missions, we must first surrender our pragmatism to the promise of communion. Only through communion with God and one another can we hope to become signs of God's reign on earth.

## **Achieve Development, Not Charity**

"Acts of charity can be dangerous," writes John Perkins, founder of the Christian Community Development Association, "because givers can feel good about actions that actually accomplish very little. The result is that their sense of satisfaction takes away any motivation to seek more creative long-range development strategies. Overcoming an attitude of charity is a difficult task because it requires givers to demand more of themselves than good will."<sup>7</sup>

While driving in downtown Nairobi with my teenage daughters, street children approached our car, tapping on the window with one hand and holding up an open palm with the other. Ignoring my warnings, the girls opened the window and began handing out coins. Within seconds, children begging for a little kindness enveloped the car. My daughters realized they had created a dilemma. With teary eyes they asked, "Daddy, what are we supposed to do?" By now, people on the streets were shooing the children away. I drove a few blocks and found a parking spot where a boy stood guard. I paid the boy to watch my car, and turning to my daughters I said, "That's what we're supposed to do."

The way to avoid the dangers of charity is to practice development instead. Charity is what people do for others. Development is what people do for themselves. If charity is to have any lasting value, it must be the kind that fosters development.

## **Development: What People Do for Themselves**

Development is difficult because it is slow, outside of our control, and at times frustrating. Compared to simply giving things to people or doing things for people, development is essentially a slow process of learning and change. Development is that process through which people grow in their ability to take control over their own lives and improve the conditions of life that affect them. Progress occurs as people examine their own problems, identify solutions, learn new behaviors and skills, and take action to improve the quality of life.

Development is what people do for themselves. It cannot be imposed. That's not to say you can't force change. You can. But change is not necessarily the same as development. People cannot be made to develop any more than a farmer can make plants grow. The farmer's task is to work with the plants, to add water and fertilizer, and to keep the weeds away. But God makes the plants grow. In the same way, one person merely helps another person or community achieve the best conditions in which to grow.

Anyone wanting to help others — whether teachers, counselors, or short-term missionaries — must do so in a way that enables people to effect changes in their own lives and communities. Of necessity helping becomes a journey rather than a project, a quest for something better in the life of a people — something they cherish and own, something sustainable on which they can build.

When short-term missions are a process of learning with others and implementing homegrown solutions, we have begun to make the shift from charity to development. What once were random acts of kindness now have a clear purpose and fit within a story. Charity is no longer a one-way, giver-receiver relationship, but a sharing of resources toward a common goal. Beneficiaries are no longer voiceless recipients, but contributors and architects of change in their own lives and communities. The risks of careless charity fade as short-term missionaries serve under local leadership and work shoulder-to-shoulder with local people.

## **The Best God's People Have to Offer**

As good as it is to facilitate development, that is not the best of what God's people have to offer. We can go one step further.

The best that God's people have to offer is ourselves. Only when we put ourselves in direct, personal relationship with the people of God in the hard places do we begin to understand their needs and accompany them in the pilgrimage of faith. In the same way, we need their companionship so that, as the apostle Paul said, “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13 NIV). When we accompany others, it is no longer the rich stepping down to help the poor, but brothers and sisters in Christ stepping across to journey with one another.

Are we willing to pursue communion above expediency? Are we willing to take the time required to envision what God is inviting us to do together, to care for one another as members of God's household, and to learn and grow together so that we may declare the excellencies of God?

Others have done it. So can we — if we resolve to be God's missionary people. ■

## Source

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## Endnotes

1. Robert J. Priest and Joseph Paul Priest, "They See Everything and Understand Nothing," *Missiology* 36, no. 1 (2008): 54.
2. See *Missiology* 34, no. 4 (October 2006). See also Robert J. Priest, "Selected Articles (written by scholars) on Short-Term Missions," available at <http://www.tiu.edu/divinity/academics/phd/ics/stmbib>.
3. Miriam Adeney, "Shalom Tourist: Loving Your Neighbor While Using Her," *Missiology* 34, no. 4 (2006): 461.
4. Daniel Rickett, "Short-Term Missions for Long-Term Partnership," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2008): 42–45.
5. Andy Crouch and Simon Chan, "The Mission of the Trinity," *Christianity Today* (June 6, 2007); accessed October 1, 2007 at [http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/06/the\\_mission\\_of\\_the\\_trinity.html](http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/06/the_mission_of_the_trinity.html).
6. U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons Report (2003).
7. John M. Perkins, *Beyond Charity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 23.