



Short-term Missions for Long-term Partnership

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Say what you will about the benefits of short-term missions, but there's a strong case to be made that it is shifting in the wrong direction. The lines between short-term missions and global tourism have blurred and that at a time when "slum tourism" is on the rise.

"Slum tourism' stirs controversy in Kenya," a newspaper announced. The report describes the bitter irony of the rising number of tourists to the Kibera slum with little benefit to its inhabitants. According to the report, at least one travel agency has added Kibera to its list of tours.

Tourists or God's missionary people?

Even more troubling than the existence of slum tourism is the fact that it may easily be confused with short-term missions (STM). In many ways STM is already equated with tourism. What do you call it when people with the time and money travel to a foreign country for a week or two? Missions experts have discovered that research on tourism can inform STM (Adeney, 2006). Indeed, missions researchers are encouraged to dialogue with their tourism counterparts.

I have no quarrel with tourism or with learning from it. But is the promise of short-term missions a Christianized version of tourism; experiences to awaken the unscarred and overfed to their privilege? Are we tourists or are we God's missionary people?¹

STM enthusiasts brush off the question to the peril of North American missions. What is God's intention through the short-term mission movement? Is it to make us better tourists or better witnesses of his grace? Will the spectacle of short-term missions reveal us to be God's missionary people or the plutocrats of globalization?

If the short-term mission movement is the work of God, its purpose is to enable the church to be the church in today's global neighborhood. The church is called to announce Christ, love her neighbors and put God on display. It has no other identity and no other agenda.

Like all of God's gifts, STM 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.

STM is at a tipping point and the forces of tourism appear to be winning. A growing body of research suggests STM is not delivering on its promise.

- Short-term missions tend to reinforce stereotypes and deepen misconceptions about the poor. (Priest, et al, 2006, Linhart, 2006, Livermore, 2004, Ver Beek, 2006).
- A short-term experience is as likely to increase ethnocentrism as decrease it. (Priest, et al, 2006, Linhart, 2006).

- Whether STM experiences abroad improve interethnic relationships at home is unclear (Priest, et al, 2006).
- People with extensive STM experience are no less materialistic than those with none (Priest, et al, 2006).
- Short-term missions have little appreciable impact on giving. It does not appear to have increased financial support for career service and may be siphoning money away (Priest, et al, 2006, Ver Beek, 2006).
- Short-term visitors are less prepared to share the gospel than local Christians (Birth, 2006, Ver Beek, 2006).
- STM has less positive impact on those they serve than do local groups providing the same services (Ver Beek, 2006).
- STM may be more a burden than a help to Christians in the host culture (Baar, 2003, Van Engen, 2000, Zehner 2006).

We know what's wrong with short-term missions. They're short. It's the brevity that reinforces stereotypes, perpetuates misperceptions about the poor, and feeds the quick-fix mentality. It's the brevity that leaves local Christians feeling shortchanged. The very notion that missions can be short plays into tourism. Although mission researchers are quick to emphasize that better preparation and coaching will reduce negative effects, it is not simply a problem of preparation (Priest 2006, Linhart 2006).

The problem reaches to the very core of the movement's identity and purpose. How is STM part of God's agenda for the church?

The answer lies not in tourism but in the fellowship of the gospel, not in short-term excursions but in long-term commitments as members of God's extended family (Eph. 2:19-22).

Claiming the promise of short-term missions

If we are to realize the promise of short-term missions they must be made subordinate to, and at the service of, long-term relationships in the work of the gospel.

While there are no easy answers to effective partnering, short-term missions serve long-term partnership when:

1. The fellowship of the gospel is at the center of relationships with Christians abroad. The term *fellowship* in the New Testament refers primarily to participating in something, not merely sharing something in common with others. It refers to the kind of relationship in which you have something to gain and something to lose. STM serves long-term partnership when it is rooted in a relationship

of self-sacrifice toward a common goal.

2. The advance of the gospel is at the center of shared aspirations. The gospel, the good news that in Jesus, God himself has reconciled us to himself, is both the ground and the goal of Christian fellowship. Christians may collaborate for a variety of reasons, but it is the gospel that ties us together. STM serves long-term partnership when the gospel is the common sense of mission.
3. The basic principles of intercultural partnership are taken seriously. The imperatives of partnership are a common identity in worldview and values, a shared vision, a mutually supportive and respectful relationship, a pattern of open two-way communication, a focus on achievements, and willingness to learn and change. STM serves long-term partnership when short-term initiatives are effectively integrated into authentic partnerships.²
4. Short visits are part of a multi-year series of engagements. Short-term visits should never stand alone unless they are exploratory in nature. It is never appropriate to visit the poor as one visits a zoo. STM serves long-term partnership when it's part of a coordinated plan, not unrelated events.
5. Short-term efforts contribute to a holistic strategy of development. The causes of poverty are complex and interrelated. Programs that address interrelated issues simultaneously or in stages have a greater, more permanent impact. STM serves long-term partnership when the focus is on helping local people take charge of their own lives and solve their own problems.
6. Short-term visitors are carefully screened and prepared to serve based on criteria designed in collaboration with the host church or ministry. The receiving group should have at least as much influence on the selection of short-term visitors as the sending group. STM serves long-term partnership when standards for participation are the result of joint effort.
7. Short-term visitors follow the lead of the local host regarding all aspects of engagement such as itineraries, what and how tasks are performed, customs, and courtesies. This may require less glamorous roles and more servant-like duties. More time may be needed for relationships rather than "getting the job done." STM serves long-term partnership when teams work under the authority of the local partner.
8. Service groups are small: five to seven people. Small groups are less intrusive, easier to manage,

and more likely to bond with members of the local community. Small groups lower the risk of damage to the local host and its ministries. STM serves long-term partnership when consideration for the potential impact on the local host and community comes first.

9. Greater emphasis is placed on supporting local ministry than doing the ministry of local Christians. Local believers are far more adept at sharing Christ than the outsider. It is only when we serve in the humility of Christ over several years that we can begin to discern ways that the gospel will become meaningful in a foreign culture. STM serves long-term partnership when it is characterized by the humility and self-sacrificial love of Christ.
10. Involvement by short-term visitors is seen as a high point in the journey of faith rather than a starting point. Those who have not served at home cannot be expected to serve well away from home. STM serves long-term partnership when it involves people with a demonstrated passion for Christ and his kingdom.

STM has enormous potential to equip God's people to become true brothers and sisters in the global neighborhood. But to do so will require shifting the emphasis from piecemeal, touristic outings to authentic fellowship in the gospel. Anything short of this commitment will collapse into the self-interest so endemic to Western culture. ■

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the church as God's missionary people, see Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991.
2. For a discussion of the imperatives of partnership, see Daniel Rickett, *Making Your Partnership Work*, Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2002. For an insightful essay on authentic partnership, see Roland Hoksbergen, "Partnering for Development: Why It's so Important, Why It's so Hard, How to Go about It." REC Focus: Quarterly Journal from the REC Commissions, Vol. 3, No. 24, December 2003, 3-21. This can be found on the net at <http://rec.gospelcom.net/index.php?section=134>.

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