
THE DANGERS OF SHORT-TERM MISSION

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The mission world is in the midst of a wave of enthusiasm for short-term mission (STM). Every year more & more churches and individuals are getting involved in mission: for a week, a summer, even a year or two. I am a part of this wave. My wife co-ordinates all the short-term teams which visit Taiwan with OMF. I help orientate, lead and debrief some of these teams. In the past I have also joined teams as a member and a leader.



Short-term missions can be a great blessing. Short-termers find their lives transformed by their experience, contacts are made, people hear the gospel for the first time and some come to faith in Christ. I am all for short-term mission.

And yet at the same time I am distressed at the corresponding decline in interest in long-term or career missions and I suspect that there is a link between these two.

The current popularity of short-term mission is partly a result of confusion and misunderstanding about the nature of mission and an uncertainty about the need for long-term/career missions.

Despite the benefits of STM, I believe that the current enthusiasm for short-term missions, carries dangers for the future of modern missions.

Consider with me some of the features that can be found in short-term missions today, the misconceptions that lie behind them and the dangers that these bring.

Mission as a debt to repay

The most obvious expression of this is found in the "Military Service" of mission. That is, people join a summer team or perhaps give a year or two to mission and then go back to live a normal life at home as if they have paid their debt to mission. This betrays the attitude of mission as a duty which can be fulfilled before the real business of life begins.

Another expression of this is seen in those who regard mission as a summer program to join each year. Both of these patterns reveal a view of mission as something that can be packaged into a fixed time frame, so that it doesn't interfere too much with the rest of life. There is a recognition that we need to do mission, but a mistaken belief that this is something which can be "done" and then put to one side, either forever, or for most of the year.

This misunderstanding can extend to churches as well. A handful of young people reporting on their summer mission trip can give a congregation the impression that the church is fulfilling its commitment to world mission whereas in fact it may have no thought-out strategy for missions involvement. In a sense then short-term missions may falsely assuage the church's feelings of debt to foreign mission.

Mission cannot be limited to a portion of our lives

Commitment to mission is simply an extension of our commitment to Jesus and his gospel (Mark 10:29-30). This is a commitment which demands all of us, not just a part. This is not to say we are all to be full-time long-term overseas missionaries. However, concern, interest and involvement in mission cannot be limited to a portion of our lives. Short-term involvement carries the danger that we think it can.

Mission as social work

Many short term trips have a specific and practical focus. This makes it easier to gain interest and support, and gives short-termers something to do which does not necessarily rely on speaking the local language. Building projects, disaster relief, working in an orphanage, and medical or para-medical services fall into this category.

The danger of emphasising these types of activities is that people begin to equate mission with general good works, social aid & development. There may even be a feeling that mission is not legitimate unless it includes some worthwhile activity that provides practical care and aid to needy people, as if evangelism is never enough in itself.

These are all good things that Christians should participate in. However, these activities are not in themselves specifically Christian, they are not required to earn the right to evangelise and they are not at the heart of mission. In fact, an emphasis on this activities may reinforce the post-modern conceit that all religions are the same as other religions, cults, and charities also undertake these activities.

The heart of mission in the NT is the proclamation of the gospel which encompasses evangelism, discipleship and the establishment of Christian communities. Paul sees his identity as Christ's ambassador proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20). This is the key responsibility of God's people to the world and the right to evangelise comes from God's command and commission. It is also the most worthwhile thing we can do as it involves the offer of an eternal relationship with Jesus!

It is important to recognise that project-focused short-term trips are only mission to the extent

that they have proclamation of the gospel at the heart of their purpose & integrated with the other practical elements.

Mission as activity

Another perception that can arise from STM is the view of mission as an activity or an event; an evangelistic meeting, a camp, a coffee shop, literature distribution. These are often used as they can be completed in the limited time restraints imposed by short-term mission. Activities like these can see amazing results in terms of contacts made and even decisions for Christ. In the light of the apparent effectiveness of STM activities, it is easy to begin questioning the need for long-term mission. Why bother moving, learning a language, and dealing with culture shock and dislocation when you can achieve so much in such a short time?



Some fruit can be seen in a very short time, but in most parts of the world this is the exception. In Taiwan, it has been estimated that it takes an average of 8 years of exposure to Christian witness before a person becomes a Christian. Whether a person perseveres also depends on how long it takes before they believe. (*Mending the Nets: Taiwan Church Growth and Loss in the 1980's*, Allen Swanson) The quicker the process, the more likely that in a few years they will have left the faith!

The number of decisions for Christ is not a reliable indication of true fruit. Returning in 5 or 10 years and seeing where those people are at that time is a much better measure. And the evidence suggests that the longer the conversion process, the better the long term results.

But focusing simply on conversions also misunderstands the nature of overseas mission and of Christian ministry in general. The goal of ministry is not conversion, it is building com-

munities of mature and growing believers. If ministry stops with evangelism then most of the harvest either dies or remains weak and unhealthy.

People not only need to believe but they need life-long teaching, encouragement and care to enable them to grow and live faithfully in their community. Ministry is more like raising a family than throwing a party. It takes time, lots of time. And it is most effective in long-term committed relationships.

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Mission is like this as well. Someone needs to stick around to disciple, teach and to help those who believe to keep growing and multiplying. Ideally this task will be taken up by local believers and churches, but on the mission field it will often be many years before this is possible. This is often slower in mission contexts than in the more Christianised West. There are religious and cultural issues that believers must face and resolve if they are to be godly. These are different in every culture. In some contexts believers need to deal with problems of severe poverty and injustice. In Taiwan, believers face issues such as what to do during traditional family worship at funerals or on feast days; of whether to be baptised if parents oppose them; of how to show proper filial piety without worshipping their ancestors. There are no easy answers and, as foreigners, we often haven't had to face or think through these questions previously. As a result, in pioneering mission fields it may be generations before the church is really able to

work through and resolve the question of what a godly Christian looks like in that culture.

Much can be accomplished by short-term mission - contacts can be made, people can be converted, leaders can be trained - but none of this can possibly replace the long-term involvement of living in a community as those who not only share the words of the gospel but also their lives with the people. The danger of STM is that it may lead people to discount the necessity, indeed, the priority of long-term mission.

Short-term and cultural imperialism

In many countries short-term teams use English teaching as the main method of spreading the gospel. This is successful in attracting students desperate for English to events which are often openly evangelistic. However, it associates the gospel and the church with Western language and culture and can add an extra element of foreignness to the image of Christianity. This is unhelpful in all countries and may be disastrous in some.

Furthermore, by associating the church with education for the elite this may alienate the working class who have less interest in learning a foreign language and result in a church for the middle and upper-classes.

The use of English teaching is the most obvious example of the tendency of STM to use ministry methods which are designed to suit the short-term missionaries more than the target audience. English teaching can be a useful tool but it may also be the result of Western imperialism - confusing our own culture and customs with the gospel.

Unsuitable methods of ministry can have serious implications for the healthy development of the church. We may be in danger of creating a new generation of 'rice Christians' who are attracted by what they perceive they can gain from the church rather than to the gospel itself.



Short-term as a drain on mission

Mission resources are limited. This includes personnel, time, money and interest. An investment in STM will almost inevitably drain resources away from long-term mission - unless the short-term program is functioning effectively as a mobilisation tool.

Churches and individuals are putting a lot of financial commitment into backing short-term missions. Large amounts of money each year are being spent on short-termers who will be the main ones to benefit from these trips. This may divert funds which could be used to support committed long-term missionaries and ministries which benefit local people.

STM also demands a large investment of time and energy from mission personnel on both home and field sides. For field missionaries this can be a significant distraction from their normal work.

It is important to recognise that STM takes resources. This can be a worthwhile investment if it furthers the cause of world mission. But there is also a danger that it can become a drain, shifting resources away from ministry to unreached peoples and towards providing experiences for wealthy Christian young people from the West.

Short-term as a distraction

"Do I become a missionary? What should I do? Where should I go?"

Perhaps the most tragic result of STM is that it can actually hinder people from answering these questions and taking the step to becoming long-term missionaries.

One of the reasons people do not get to the mission field is they simply don't get around to it. Many people think God may be leading them to be a missionary but it doesn't turn out that

way. It is not because they decide against it, but time goes past, they find they have financial and family commitments and it all gets too complicated. On top of this, most mission involvement has an expiry date. Language learning and cultural adjustment get harder as you get older. There are exceptions, but mission is not something you can easily get into later in life.

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STM can (and should) be a stepping stone into longer term mission involvement, either by going or supporting mission. However, STM, whether through repeated summer teams or a medium term involvement (1-3 years), gives people a way to postpone the decision about what God wants them to do long-term. And this decision must be made. No-one can spend their whole life being "short-term". We all settle somewhere and do something long-term. The only question is where & what. Postponing or avoiding the decision in itself is a decision. It is a decision to not be a missionary because the default option is to just continue living in my home country and doing whatever I am now. You only end up in long term mission by making the decision to do it and then taking concrete steps to get there.

It is a privilege to be called by God to serve him long-term in another nation and culture. It would be a tragedy if in promoting STM we actually help people to avoid taking this exciting but difficult step of committing to long-term mission involvement.

Conclusion

With the popularity of STM, it is vital that we understand what it can and can't achieve; how it relates to long-term mission and ministry in general; and the reasons why we should or shouldn't be involved in STM. It can be an excellent tool for mobilisation, for education, for evangelism and for the personal growth of those involved. At the same, STM as it is currently understood, carries with it a number of misconceptions and dangers. Are we alert to these as we promote or participate in STM?