Maximizing the missional value of short-term mission

Gorden R Doss, Andrews University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/gorden_doss/11/
Thank you for your interest in the

Seventh-day Adventist Missions Resources
Digital Library

Andrews University Digital Library

Please honor the copyright of this document by not duplicating or distributing additional copies in any form without the author’s express written permission. Thanks for your cooperation.
Chapter 15

* * *

MAXIMIZING THE MISSIONAL VALUE OF SHORT-TERM MISSION

Gorden R. Doss

American Christians have an obligation to maximize the value of their missional engagement abroad. Short-term mission (STM) is a significant, though controversial, element of that engagement. To be effective, STM must rest upon appropriate assumptions. This paper discusses three assumptions or starting points: defining the primary purpose of STM, being prepared to relate to wealth and power imbalance in STM, and the necessity of thorough training for STM.

Introduction

Short-term mission (STM) has become an important part of American Christianity's continued missional engagement with the rest of the world. Authors like Philip Jenkins (2002), Robert Wuthnow (2009), and Mark Noll (2009) have documented the fact that the majority of Christians now reside in the global south instead of in Europe and America. Yet, as Wuthnow and Noll emphasize as important themes in their books, America continues to exert significant influence on global Christianity through a variety of modes of engagement. One of those modes is STM, which carries over a million Americans abroad each year, spending $1 to 2 billion. Of this number, two-thirds travel for 14 days or less (Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown 2006:432).
The nature of America's continued mission engagement with the world has produced what Wuthnow calls a "huge debate" in leadership and missiological circles (Wuthnow 2009:8). What is the character or missional quality of that engagement? What will be the consequences, both intended and unintended, of the different methods being used? Wuthnow found that most Americans somewhat naively assume that the outcomes of American Christian interaction abroad are wholly beneficial to everyone involved (2009:8).

In contrast to the "celebratory rhetoric" in America about STM, Gary Corwin believes that its inherent limitations cause it to produce results that "seem to be less than meets the eye" (Corwin 2008:144). Comments Gene Daniels, "The dark little secret" that missionaries and indigenous people who host STM groups are reluctant to articulate is that "the average short-term missionary takes far more than he or she gives. The time invested to host the person, the resources he or she drains from the church's world mission budget, the problems the person sometimes causes . . . all-too-often . . . cost more than whatever benefit the visitor brings to the field" (Daniels 2008:152).

To the critics of STM comes the reminder that only God knows the ultimate outcomes of various mission strategies and methods. To those who naively assume that STM produces only positive outcomes comes a reminder of the painful lessons of mission history. Even the casual observer can see that some STM does not deserve to be called "mission." Attaching the word "mission" to something does not necessarily make it worthy or effective. However, maximizing the missional quality of STM requires great care and planning. Best practices will maximize positive intended outcomes and diminish potentially negative unintended outcomes.

I need to disclose my biases and perspective. I grew up with missionary parents in Malawi, served there 16 years as an adult, and now teach mission in a seminary. My experience and observation lead me to favor STM lasting three months or more. The Adventist student missionary model, where students spend 9 to 12 months, represents STM at its best. When short-termers stay for several months, fill well-defined roles, and get beyond the honeymoon-tourist-spectator phase, I have observed them making excellent contributions, even among some less receptive peoples.

Best practices for STM must rest upon appropriate assumptions about mission in general and STM in specific. This paper discusses three of those assumptions or starting points: defining the primary purpose of STM, being prepared to relate to wealth and power imbalance in STM, and the necessity of thorough training for STM.
Primary Purpose of Short-Term Mission

To maximize the missional quality of STM requires paying attention to the primary purpose or benefits of STM. Some potential benefits are similar for both STM travelers and their hosts. These could include broadening global perspectives, developing appreciation for other cultures, developing inter-cultural skills, having good fellowship, developing long-term trans-cultural relationships, experiencing spiritual renewal, deepening commitment to Christian mission, etc. Some potential benefits are different for the two groups. The pilgrimage character of STM gives the guests a heightened sense of drama and awareness that can facilitate dramatic learning. Travelers often observe suffering and poverty in a new way. The hosts typically receive material benefits for personal and ministry needs. This list of potential benefits could be expanded.

Unhealthy, mixed motivations are possible for both hosts and guests. For STM travelers, there can be a “naughty little secret” (my term, complementing Daniel’s “dark little secret”) that involves the good feeling one gets from making a contribution to the STM fund that partially fulfills one’s stewardship commitments, counts as an IRS tax deduction, gives one the feeling of “doing real missions,” gives an intense spiritual experience, and gives the family an exotic overseas vacation—all in one. The “naughty little secret” can link up with the “trickle-down theory of STM” (my term), which states that any money spent for mission trip expenses is fully justified by contributions made on the trip to the hosts and by the increased support for world missions and humanitarian service that STM generates down the line. Unfortunately, research indicates that STM does not generate the increased support assumed by the “trickle-down theory of STM” (Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown 2006:435).

STM hosts can also succumb to unhealthy motivations. Believers in developing countries can view visitors as mere money carriers and use them opportunistically in a way that is unhealthy both to themselves as individuals and to the local church. Relationships built on phony, manipulative friendliness are unhealthy. When local congregations become dependent on American donations, their long-term congregational development is hindered.

Paul discussed mixed motivations for preaching Christ and concluded that “the important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached” (Phil. 1:18, NIV). The history of Christian mission documents an abundance of mixed motivations. Thus, STM must not be held to a perfectionist standard. Yet, seeking good motivation for every type of Christian service is
a requirement because growth in Christ includes the purification of motives and because motivation shapes service.

I will not try to parse the multi-layered, unhealthy purposes and motivations that are possible for everyone involved with STM. Rather, I will address the issue broadly by asking this question: Is the main purpose of STM to benefit the travelers or the hosts? The easy answer is "both," but in my observation the de facto answer for too many Americans is "travelers." Many specific issues of motivation will be addressed by answering this question.

One mission pastor told me that because of the recognized ambiguous outcomes of STM for the hosts, his large church had decided to be honest and forthright by defining the benefits for the travelers as primary. His goal was to give every visitor an STM "experience," not necessarily at the expense of the hosts, but with the recognition that the visitors might benefit most. One long-term medical missionary reflected the same perspective by telling me that he was a missionary primarily for the blessings he received from the experience. I hasten to add that both the mission pastor and the missionary were very caring people. The fact that the mission pastor and the long-term missionary shared a similar view suggests that the question of motivation involves basic theological assumptions.

Is it theologically acceptable to make the blessings for the one who goes on a mission trip primary? I think not. However blessed the experience of performing any Christian service may be for the one serving, the primary purpose has to be to benefit those served. Surely the whole "divine drama" of God's mission (See Moreau, Corwin, & McGee 2004:28ff), with the incarnation at its center, supports this assertion. Paul's epistles record many blessed experiences he had along with the hardships. However, it is unimaginable that having a "good experience" was the primary purpose, either for himself or his team. Training a missionary team was an important element of Paul's strategy, but his primary focus was on non-believers and believers in the churches he planted. Our missional context is obviously different from Paul's, but I believe he demonstrated principles we should follow.

If, as research suggests, the long-term effects of the STM "good experience" for the visitor are less positive and long lasting than is often assumed, making the visitor's benefit primary is wrong for pragmatic reasons in addition to theological reasons. Could making a "good experience" for the traveler the primary purpose of STM be the reflection of a narcissistic culture? Wuthnow critiques American Christianity for its "consumerist mentality" that makes the church member a "religious consumer" of ecclesial products, incentives, and experiences (Wuthnow 2009:15, 16). Does STM fall under this critique when having a "good experience" is the primary purpose?
I submit that the primary purpose for STM must be that "Christ is preached" effectively to the hosts and their community through a variety of contextually appropriate modes of wholistic service. Assessing effectiveness is more challenging than simply counting people who come forward at a meeting or are baptized. The valid benefits for the travelers must be seen as secondary gifts of grace for which thanks is given, much as preachers give thanks when preaching is a blessing to themselves. Appropriate attention should be paid to maximizing these secondary gifts in quality and duration through pre-trip training and post-trip debriefing with the STM team and their home church, as we shall see below.

Making service to the hosts primary gives STM a biblical focus that can shape decisions about particular issues. A cluster of important questions are implied that STM planners need to ask about the hosts:

- How is God working among and through the people we wish to visit?
- How can we best join and enhance their ministry?
- What needs have been identified by the hosts?
- Which of those needs can our group address, at least in part?
- What human and material resources are available to enhance the hosts' ministry and address their needs?
- How can trip expenditures reflect the primary focus on service to the hosts?
- How many people with what skills are needed to achieve the trip goals for the hosts?
- What training and preparation does the team need to fulfill the trip goals for the hosts?
- How can we prepare to initiate (or enhance) a long-term partnership if the hosts want to form such a partnership?

Making benefits for the travelers secondary (though important) implies another set of questions:

- What are the trip goals for the travelers and how can they be achieved?
- What human and material resources are needed to achieve the trip goals for the travelers?
- How can expenditures reflect the secondary focus on the traveling team?
- What training and preparation does the team need to fulfill trip goals for themselves?

Some individual questions for the traveler are brought into focus by making the hosts primary:

- Do I sense an authentic call from God to serve in STM?
Encountering: God in Life and Mission

- Will my contribution to this trip be greater if I go or if I stay home and give support with an offering?
- If I go, what contribution to the trip goals for the host and the team can I make?
- What do I need to do to prepare myself for effective service to the hosts and my team?
- What do I need to do to facilitate my personal trip goals?

I think that the group and individual reflection suggested above would produce STM teams that were smaller, more focused and more effective in the field. Sending churches could move away from simply trying to get as many members as possible onto the airplane. The logistical burden of hosting STM teams would be decreased. In summary, the missional value of STM is enhanced when its primary purpose is service to the hosts.

**Wealth and Power Imbalance in Short-Term Mission**

To maximize the missional quality of STM, the travelers need to be prepared to serve in a truly Christian way in the context of a wealth and power imbalance. Most STM trips bring relatively wealthy people into contact with people who are less materially wealthy. In this kind of encounter, there are inherent power and wealth imbalances. Teenage visitors often have more pocket money than their adult hosts earn in months, to say nothing of adult visitors. American teams, with their good clothing, computers, cameras, I-Pods, and sound equipment simply “reek” of riches that local people can only dream about. This makes today’s STM travelers susceptible to some of the same pitfalls of the colonial era when missionaries controlled everything and locals sometimes merely went along because of their powerlessness.

Even though partnership is an oft-stated goal and theme for STM, Corwin suggests that it is generally more of a “power trip” than a partnership (Corwin 2008:144). Edwin Zehner (2006:512) critiques the “Delta Force” model, and Hunter Farrell (2007:69) critiques the “Paratrooper Incursion” model, both of which view the STM trip as a military-like operation of spiritual power projection. Oscar Muriu (2009), a pastor in Nairobi, says that Kenyans know when it’s summer in America because the color of Nairobi’s streets changes as STM groups appear in full tourist regalia.

Relationships are unavoidably warped in different ways when there is a wealth and power gap. If you are from America (or another wealthy country), put yourself
into the picture by visualizing how you would respond if you lived in a declining town in rural America and Bill Gates and a group of wealthy friends came to spend two weeks working with your church. The more wealthy tend to view themselves and their contributions more favorably than can be justified, and the less wealthy tend to be more agreeable and less critical than can be justified. The valid desire for a new church building can cause a local pastor to support almost any suggestion made by the STM team, while the STM team may think that every idea they express is contextually appropriate because the pastor never disagrees.

Recently, a multicultural STM group arrived at a Christian university in Africa with plans to hold a week of revival meetings and do some construction work. When the university provost asked who was to be the revival speaker, he was shocked to discover that the speaker had a gold earring and hairdo that were strictly forbidden on his campus and by the local Christian community. Using his best diplomacy, he told the group that no one looking like that could preach on his campus. The group responded that unless “pastor earring” was allowed to preach, they would take their donation and themselves back home. Much conflict ensued, with frantic calls to denominational executives and board members. In the end, the provost preached the revival and the donation was received. Had the provost been weak-kneed, the STM group would have presented a very negative view of Christi­anity in the local context.

The reality of relational warping caused by wealth and power imbalance places the obligation upon the travelers to be what Jonathan Bonk calls the “righteous rich” and to practice what Miriam Adeney calls “godly tourism” (Adeney 2006:464). Human encounters involve the exchange of both material and non-material assets (such as friendship, loyalty, esteem, and reputation), sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously. Healthy encounters bring roughly equal benefits to the parties, while unhealthy encounters exploit one or both parties. Both parties can be exploited when they use each other to achieve material or non-material ends. In a worst case scenario, STM visitors use hosts as ecclesial “Disney employees” to give them a spiritual-cultural-missional high while the hosts say and do almost anything to milk dollars from the visitors.

When Americans visit the developing world, they are usually in a “power-up” position in both material and non-material capital. The material advantage comes from their obvious wealth, while the non-material advantage comes from being seen as more modern, sophisticated, educated, and socially/politically powerful. The obligation for Christians on the “power-up” side is to make every possible effort to ensure that those on the “power-down” side receive equitable benefits from
the encounter, even if not all of their issues and needs can be resolved.

Adeney has noted that STM involves several kinds of encounter or exchange (Adeney 2006:464-472). First, there is a physical encounter. Tourists consume local resources and place a burden on the local economy, ecology, and infrastructure without necessarily benefitting the local people. An ethical physical encounter will bring at least as much good to the hosts as the visitors receive. “Godly tourists” will intentionally seek to benefit local people by directing spending toward local businesses and minimizing their “footprint” on the ecology and infrastructure as much as possible.

Second, there is a cultural encounter. The temptation to feel culturally superior can be overwhelming for visitors from wealthy, powerful countries. A STM “power trip” can bring a team of task-oriented bulldozers (human and sometimes mechanical) into a community in a way that is culturally disorienting and disruptive. Completion of the task can completely eclipse relationship-building activities. One church-building team virtually refused to interact with the locals as they sought to complete the task on time. The training for one group of student evangelists included instructions to stay in the hotel room each day studying the evening’s sermon instead of associating with the people. Effective STM tourists will show respect for the local culture for both theological and practical reasons. Theologically, God’s “cultural mandate” allows all peoples to create and maintain their cultures, and ethical visitors will show respect, even if locals may seem “backward” to them. For purely practical reasons, visitors must work cooperatively and respectfully within local cultural norms so that whatever initiatives they make will be sustainable when they are gone.

Third, STM involves a spiritual encounter. Effective visitors will respect the fact that the spiritual environment of the hosts may be quite different from their own. Worship, music, and preaching styles may be very different. The utilization of spiritual gifts also differs between cultures. If local patterns are not respected, the character and quality of worship in the host church can be so changed that it bears no relationship to regular life and worship. Visitors should arrive as spiritual seekers and learners, willing to be served spiritually and willing to have their service shaped by the local spiritual environment. Visitors should not be the only ones singing, preaching, and witnessing during the visit.

In encounters where power and wealth are imbalanced, it is important that the assessment of the exchange be accurate and that it include both material and non-material assets. Unless care is taken, visitors could make an inaccurate assessment of the net material benefits they bring to their hosts. Visitor travel expense should
not be counted as a contribution to the hosts—because it is not. The full cost of hosting the STM team, including hidden costs, needs to be assessed. Muriu (2009) says that his own church often provides a “reverse subsidy” to visiting groups, of which the visitors are oblivious. In other words, hosting STM teams is a net expense for his church. Those of us who have organized any kind of conference know that there are always expenses of which many attendees are unaware. Ethical STM teams will ensure that their hosting organizations do not suffer a net financial loss. This will require tact and diplomacy because accepting hospitality is part of being a good visitor, especially in places like Africa where showing hospitality is a strong traditional value. Making sure that hosts don’t suffer a net loss is the lowest, minimal standard. If benefits for the host are defined as primary, perhaps STM groups should set a higher standard. Is it too radical to suggest that material benefits for the hosts should exceed what the visitors spend on themselves?

Non-material assets must also be included in the assessment of an encounter. One of the issues for STM visitors from the West is that our culture predisposes us to undervalue the non-material assets that are part of human encounters. When seen in their true scale, the non-material gifts host communities give to their STM guests are to be greatly valued. These gifts can include a warm welcome, personal time and energy needed to facilitate the visit, patience with cultural unfamiliarity, forgiveness for cultural blunders, advocacy with immigration or police authorities or business people, protection from thieves, providing the general social guidance needed to negotiate an unfamiliar culture, loyal support of visitors’ ministries, and accepting their suggestions. In Africa, hospitality is such a strong value that hosts often super-extend themselves in non-material ways to make visitors welcome.

On the other side of the encounter, the visitors also convey important non-material gifts. The hosts often receive enormous social capital in their communities by receiving American guests, who are often given celebrity status. Being the intermediaries for the celebrities elevates the status of the hosts. When genuine friendships are established, they carry great significance for “power-down” hosts. Such social capital can enhance mission and ministry in the local community.

Understanding the importance of the mutual non-material exchange may be most important for Westerners. The hosts stand to benefit greatly from the fellowship and relational dimensions of STM, which travelers sometimes undervalue because of their task-oriented, materialistic approach. Material gifts are valued, but the gift of true friendship and the building of long-term relationships are greatly treasured. The travelers often benefit more than they realize from the generous non-material benevolence of the hosts. Ethical travelers will value and intentionally facilitate a generous and equitable non-material exchange.
Training for Short-Term Mission

The missional value of STM can be maximized through good pre-trip training and post-trip debriefing for STM travelers. To state the point negatively, failure to adequately prepare a team before the trip and then debrief them afterwards significantly decreases positive outcomes, especially for the very short trips of 14 days or less (see Priest 2008; Livermore 2006). Many anecdotes are heard of STM groups whose missional contribution is greatly diminished because not even the most elementary principles are taught.

The years of pre-flight and post-flight work done by astronauts are a helpful analogy for STM. Astronauts spend such brief periods in the alien environment of space that they need extensive pre-flight training to function effectively and interpret what they experience. When they return, extensive work is needed to interpret and apply their data.

Long-term missionaries typically receive elaborate pre-field training and post-field debriefing. When they arrive in the field they are immersed in the local culture and learn the language over a period of many years. Yet, their service remains very challenging and complex as they seek to cross cultural and religious barriers effectively.

The STM traveler is very much like the astronaut and very different from the long-term missionary. Depending on the destination, a sizeable part of the trip is spent on travel, logistics, and having fun. These non-ministry or non-people-engaged days can easily consume half of the time on shorter trips. The challenge is immense for cultural outsiders to make effective engagement during the brief, intense people-engaged days.

STM travelers often go with high expectations of having a “whole life-changing experience” and of “doing real mission” in the “real mission field.” On a trip of 14 days or less, the only way to even approach fulfilling such expectations is through excellent pre-trip training and post-trip debriefing. Without such training, the travelers will not step onto the plane with even the most basic concepts about Christian mission in place; they will not be prepared to observe and interpret accurately what they see and experience; they will not be able to relate to the hosts and minister among them effectively; and, finally, once back home they won’t be able to retain and apply the lessons of the trip to their long-term lives. In summary, the benefits for both hosts and travelers will be greatly reduced, rendering the high cost of STM unjustifiable.
Maximizing the Missional Value of Short-term Mission

At the minimum, pre-trip training should probably include the following:

- Overview of Christian mission, past and present.
- Introduction to the concept of culture and cross-cultural missions.
- Basic skills of being a good learner and guest in a cross-cultural setting.
- Introduction to the host people and the progress of Christian missions among them.
- Guidelines for appropriate dress and behavior among the host people.
- Guidelines for personal safety and health on the trip.
- Development of trip goals for the hosts and the travelers through interaction with the hosts.
- Development of individual trip goals.

Post-trip debriefing needs to include the following:

- A narrative review of the trip, including high points and low points, to see how God worked in and through the hosts and the travelers.
- Assessment of team goals and their achievement, with a cataloguing of valuable lessons learned for the benefit of future trips.
- Assessment and sharing of individuals goals and their achievement, with planning for the implementation of valuable lessons learned.
- Application of valuable lessons learned to individual and corporate plans for service in the local church and community.

Conclusion

As the American church seeks to remain engaged effectively with global mission, we must invest our God-given human and material resources wisely and strategically. Some activities that may be acceptable in and of themselves may not be effective when assessed for their contribution to extending God’s kingdom. Healthcare workers in emergency rooms use triage to distribute resources to the most needy patients. In the same way, the church must use its perennially limited resources wisely to facilitate the best possible engagement in global mission.

Notes

1 Such as the fact that church buildings can sometimes be built for one-tenth the cost by local peoples as compared with American teams.
2 See Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown 2006:435–445, and other articles in Mis-
Encountering: God in Life and Mission

sociology, October 2006, for a summary of research findings. See also articles in Priest 2008, especially Ver Beek (475 ff.), Park (531 ff.), and Decker (559 ff.).

3From a personal conversation. See also Bonk 1991.

4Ideally, the host church will also receive training and orientation, but time limitations do not allow discussion of that element.

**Chapter 14**


**Chapter 15**


**Chapter 16**

