

## **Barna on Short Term Missions (STMs)**

by Bob Young

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When I saw that the October, 2008 Barna report was focused on Short-Term Missions (STMs), it quickly caught my attention. Under the title, "Despite Benefits, Few Americans Have Experienced Short-Term Missions", the article provides a picture of the current state of STMs. The study found that few adults have ever gone on a short-term service trip of any kind, whether with a secular or religious organization. Surprisingly, only a small percentage of Christians have participated in an STM. The study shows that most of the people who participate in STMs describe the trips as life-changing (three-quarters of trip-goers report that the experience changed their life in some way). The most common areas that people mention include becoming more aware of other people's struggles (25%), learning more about poverty, justice, or the world (16%), increasing compassion (11%), deepening or enriching their faith (9%), broadening their spiritual understanding (9%), and boosting their financial generosity (5%). Others mentioned the experience helped them feel more fulfilled, become more grateful, develop new friends, and pray more.

Despite the accessibility and benefits, most U.S. Christians have never experienced an STM. Just 11% of U.S. churchgoers have ever been on an STM. Further, most of the people who have gone on such a trip did so more than five years ago. Bottom line: only 8 million of the 228 million adult residents of the U.S. have been on a short-term mission trip in the last five years. The most active group of people in terms of short-term trips was evangelical Christians (23% had taken such a trip). Today's younger generations want to serve others, and are more likely to participate in STMs than older generations. A continuing challenge is to keep an STM a spiritually-focused event, and not merely another opportunity to see the world. We easily degenerate into consumers of experience or even consumers of a cause, and fail to appreciate and participate in genuinely life-changing service.

Some surprises from the research: upscale adults were no more likely than downscale adults to have participated on a short-term service project; people who took domestic service trips reported the same degree of life-changing experiences as did those traveling overseas; the typical person who has been on a mission trip has taken two such journeys; two percent of Americans are service trip enthusiasts, having been on five or more such adventures; just 1% of Americans have ever taken a mission trip as a family.

Researcher David Kinnaman notes that short-term missions clearly benefit the people providing the assistance. In a day when many church leaders, parents and teachers are searching for ways to transform hearts and minds, one way to go about changing people's perspectives is to facilitate and host STMs.