

## ***Unexpected Lessons: Understanding Short-Term Mission as a Shared Endeavor***

by Bob Young

[edited and expanded from an article by Andy Crouch]

***What must we learn and unlearn to become agents of God's mission in the world?*** In an article which appeared in "Christianity Today", Andy Crouch described what some churches are learning and unlearning as they rethink the meaning of mission trips, especially of short-term mission (STM) trips. This article builds on Crouch's article and expands it.

Crouch began his article with a description of a STM team report that contains both the usual and the unusual.

*A few years ago I was in a church service where a team of energetic young adults was reporting on their short-term mission trip. Like most groups who have shared a mission trip, this one had plenty of cross-cultural experiences to report. "The food was so spicy," one wide-eyed young woman said, drawing laughter from the congregation. "It was terribly hot and humid—we had such a hard time getting to sleep," another team member said. With much humor, the team leader described their consternation when they arrived at a remote village only to discover that the Christians there were expecting them to lead a worship service—on the spot.*

*They had been stretched, they said, beyond their "comfort zones." They had also returned full of praise for God and love for one another and their new brothers and sisters. "We received so much more than we gave," one team member said. All of these were wonderful, true sentiments that I had heard dozens of times from returning short-term missionaries. The only difference was that I was in Nairobi, Kenya, every member of the team had been born and raised in Africa, and they had just returned from India.*

This example of a STM team from a church in Africa partnering with churches in India reflects the "multidirectional" nature of mission in the 21st century. Mission is no longer exclusively a North American enterprise. North Americans are not the only ones sending missionaries and making mission trips to other parts of the world. Such reports challenge our understanding. Crouch said that the report from the African students about the difficulties of serving cross-culturally challenged him and some of his assumptions—specifically the idea that only Westerners struggle with culture shock and crossing cultural barriers. These African mission workers, all having grown up in a society where tribal identities still shape daily life and most speaking at least one language besides English, were well ahead of the average U.S. Christian in cross-cultural awareness. In addition, they arrived in India with none of the assumed privilege and potential resentment that Western visitors may generate. Still, they experienced cross-cultural challenges typical of visiting an unfamiliar foreign nation.

In my work with Baxter Institute, a ministry-mission training school in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, I have learned that cultural variety is a fact of life. We in the U.S. may tend to think that everyone south of the border speaks Spanish and that they all share one culture. Not true! At Baxter Institute, with students from a dozen or so different countries, cultural preferences and variations are often visible. I know of a U.S. church (English-speaking) that hired a minister to work with the Hispanic population of the area. The minister they hired was Guatemalan, but

almost all of the immigrants in the community were Mexican. Need I tell you that the Hispanic work never got off the ground!

The work at Baxter Institute also bears witness to the fact that many from other nations are crossing cultural boundaries to share the gospel. We have Guatemalans in Columbia, Hondurans in Ecuador, and Mexicans in Honduras. Trust me—these are significant cultural contrasts!

The contemporary church is relearning the nature of mission work—unlearning some old “truths” which are no longer valid in some modern settings, and learning new things that were not a part of our mission awareness just a few short years ago. While I have only been closely involved in missions for about 15 years, I can testify that things are different today than they were in the 1990s. I am constantly learning and revising my ideas about global missions. One thing for which I am very thankful is that **more congregations on the mission field are accepting the challenge to be involved in the spread of the gospel.**

If we define "mission" as crossing cultural boundaries or barriers for the sake of the gospel, the global church is engaged in mission on a scale that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. The journeys of Paul and his traveling companions provide the first examples. Throughout history, the gospel has ridden the waves of trade and military conquest into new areas of the world. What is different today is that efforts to share the gospel are independent of such natural events, intentional in their focus and targets, and immense when considered as a whole. The scale of what is happening and ease of human mobility are part of a new “mission world.”

Travel and telecommunications have become less expensive and more efficient. An increasingly affluent slice of the world's population can afford to travel. More and more Christians are able to afford to travel on behalf of the gospel. Globalized economies reward and demand travel. In a changing world, the center of mission gravity continues to shift. Many initial mission efforts were done by those who set off to a far country with no plans to return. Later, missionaries went to distant lands with limited time commitments and plans to establish and leave a mature church during a missionary term of as little as 5-7 years. Today, much of the mission work in which the church is involved is done by those who travel with return tickets tucked safely inside their luggage.

Is this round-trip mobility a good thing for the advance of the gospel? Generally the answer is “Yes” but there are also challenges. Many U.S. STM teams come back with stories of new converts, new churches established, and existing churches strengthened. Those who go often express increased confidence and renewed faith that comes from taking real risks for the cause of Christ. On the other hand, there are also embarrassing stories of cultural insensitivity and mismatched expectations. Most Westerners, and especially we who live in the U.S., tend to be activists, wanting to see concrete outcomes. We go with the expectation of accomplishment. We want to report results. This may lead to “make-work” projects, sometimes with comic results. One native preacher confided, "After you leave, we repaint many of the walls that you

painted!" Another preacher told me, "We went to the village where the group reported that dozens had been baptized and a church established the previous year, but we could not find any evidence of the church continuing to meet, and the few we could find of those who had been baptized had returned to their previous lifestyles." Many cultures value preserving relationships more than they value truth-telling. They do not want to offend the visiting guests who are so well-meaning and often the source of significant funding. Truth-telling may lead to conflict; thus, short-term mission teams may come and go without ever realizing they have not really helped, and perhaps even have disappointed, the receiving partners who seemed so welcoming. **Mission efforts must constantly ask whether what is being done reflects the highest priorities of the locals regarding what needs to be done and what long-term impact the effort will have for the advance of the gospel and the salvation of souls. The modern trend is to "benevolent missions" which can meet a lot of physical needs but often have little impact on the eternal destiny of the souls being served. No better is the modern trend to count results with no plan for maturing and strengthening the new converts.**

Return tickets can lead to stunted relationships. A church sent a second short-term team to serve in a small, materially poor town in Central America they had visited the previous summer. The visiting church members were overwhelmed and surprised when their hosts tearfully told them on the last night of their visit, "We have had American Christians visit us before, but none of them ever returned." **This story focuses the need for U.S. STM groups that will carefully, thoughtfully choose a receptive area and return to work in that region again and again.**

Every cross-cultural mission trip, even the shortest STM trip, is filled with opportunities for God to make himself known and with the real potential that the group will misrepresent him. The shorter the trip, the greater the stakes, since we will can easily ignore both the blessings and the blunders. **Everyone involved in cross-cultural mission efforts must be sensitive to what is communicated by their actions, manner of dress, words, attitudes, and demeanor.**

The observation that we often receive more than we give is also normal for mission work and especially for STMs. Most groups expect to work—campaigns, Vacation Bible School, door-to-door evangelism, construction, build a school.... What many groups do not realize is that when we visit another culture for a short time, **we are guests, served with a graciousness we can seldom fully appreciate in our initial cross-cultural encounters.** Any U.S. missionary who has been on the receiving end of a STM group knows how much work it takes to host a group. From the perspective of the visiting group, the whole apparatus of preparation for STM trips assumes that we go to do something for others. In fact many groups go with a checklist of activities that will supposedly help advance the gospel. But the truth is that **it is rare that the short-term team will bring such unique skills and cross-cultural sensitivity that they can make a net contribution in their brief visit.** (A notable exception is medical and dental missions.)

Christians in other parts of the world are far more resourceful than we imagine. I rejoice that much of the productive work I see being done is being done without US resources and is owned by the local churches. I see churches planted and prospering under the direction and support of the local Christians. **A good principle for any visiting group is "not to do for the local**

**Christians what they can and should do for themselves, and not to do for them things that they cannot sustain once the group is gone.”** I know of one US STM group that came back rejoicing that they had set up 41 home Bible studies during their visit. They had worked with a church of about 15 members without a full-time minister. The church had “supply preaching” by a ministry student in a preacher training institute. I asked the group leader who was going to teach all of those Bible studies. He assumed the local church would do it. I do not know how the story came out, but as a frequent visitor to that area and based on my awareness of the dynamics, my suspicion is that the net impact of setting up 41 home Bible studies was pretty minimal. Of course, one can resort to the old adage “one soul is worth all the world”, but one must also wonder if any of those who promised to study and were never contacted were left with a negative impression or were influenced away from Christ. Progress at what price?

The good news is that more and more churches are changing the meaning of STM trips, unlearning and relearning. Some churches are planning trips carefully to build long-term partnerships rather than just to provide experiences for the local members. They are depending on the local Christians to give direction to what needs to be done rather than going with their own list of desired projects. The more we learn to make STMs genuine two-way experiences, the more we all will learn about God's work in the world—and in us.