

Short-Term Missions as a Spiritual Exercise

By Bob Young

Short-term missions (STM) have exploded in the last decade. Thousands of Christians have spent time in areas of the world generally considered mission fields—whether in the U.S. or in another country. Some of these efforts have yielded wonderful fruit, others have been as much a hindrance as a help to the missionary or church on the field.

My first experience with a STM was in the mid-1990s when I took a group of college students on a spring break trip to Honduras. Frankly, we were “green.” We had only a general idea as to why we were going and what we were to do. However, our inexperience and lack of orientation proved to be a blessing. We fit right in with “Latin Standard Time.” We had little timetable, so we spent time with the locals. We walked instead of riding everywhere, because we had not arranged appropriate transportation. We were available to deal with unseen “emergencies.” On Sunday morning, we started the 2-mile walk to church. Along the way, we helped an “eye clinic” team we had never met clean the community center after a Saturday evening wedding party. The community center was at least presentable—more than one could say for us and our Sunday clothes. After extended worship in a language the students did not understand, we checked back--the Sunday afternoon eye examinations went on as scheduled. We spent our evenings teaching at the English school, because we met someone who said they could use our help. We sang and prayed, and hopefully some of the students learned a little English. We talked to children, and played with them at a school and at several orphanages. As we concluded the week, our host family said, “You have restored my faith in short-term mission trips. You accomplished more than the groups that come with carefully laid plans.” God uses us in our weaknesses. Gracias a Dios! (Thanks be to God!)

I have sponsored many STMs since—both stateside and abroad. All types of STMs have unique challenges. This article introduces some essential dynamics of STMs abroad, with visits to unfamiliar cultures and locations. The illustrations come from my experience in Latin America, but have parallels and applications in other cultures. The article addresses the importance of spiritual preparation, the need for a philosophy of missions, and working in the cultural context. The last area is illustrated with examples of conflicts in thinking, time use, problem-solving, decision-making, and sources of power.

The importance of spiritual preparation. If we did many things wrong on the trip I described above, we did some things right. First, the students spent lots of time in preparation and prayer. We faithfully met weekly for the first 10 weeks of the spring semester. The students learned a few words and phrases, and listened as various cultural rights and wrongs were described. But most important, the students prepared spiritually. We prayed together, and individually. We asked churches to pray for our efforts. If STMs are spiritual exercises, it only makes sense that participants must prepare spiritually. We go as ambassadors of Christ, not as secular agents.

Developing a philosophy of missions. An often overlooked aspect of STMs is the importance of knowing what is to be accomplished, with appropriate cultural sensitivity. Because a STM group is not going to be on the field for very long, the tendency is to overlook the importance of having a mission philosophy to guide the projects. In reality, a mission philosophy is just as

important in STMs as in long-term mission work. This does not necessarily mean developing an extensive multi-paged document, but it is important that the group have an understanding which can guide their actions and interactions during the STM. A basic philosophy I use is this: “We will not do anything for the local church that they cannot sustain once we are gone.” Often buildings are built, contacts made, and studies arranged that are beyond the capacity of the local church to sustain once the STM team is gone. Your philosophy of mission may address cultural sensitivity, rules for gifting and relationships, and similar concerns.

Working in the cultural context. In my experience in Latin America, cultural sensitivity demands that I keep cultural differences in view. I explore five differences here to help you begin to think about these and other areas in your own STM plans.

Thought patterns. The truth is that North Americans do not think like Central Americans. Our worldviews vary. Our thinking is very different, often conflicting. That we have different worldviews should not communicate that the North American view is the Christian worldview and that all other worldviews are flawed. In some cultures the typical worldview may not reflect Christian values, but those who are trying to live out the reality of Christ in their world likely understand that conflict better than we. An example of what I have in mind is this: in North America, we believe good health can be purchased. If we get sick, our society owes us health care, even if we cannot afford the specific treatment. If we are out of shape or eat too much, we can hire a trainer to restore our health. The presence of doctors and clinics and health care is assumed. The attitude is very different in other parts of the world. When a Honduran grandmother gets sick, she and her family may acknowledge the fact that she is old and is going to die from a disease that we consider curable in the U.S. When the average life expectancy of a woman in a rural area is less than 40, the cultural expectations concerning an acceptable age for marriage and child-bearing may alter drastically. Importing our worldview to another culture may present difficulties at best, may be damaging at worst. Cultural sensitivity demands that we at least try to understand the thinking of the culture we are visiting.

Time use. Conflicts about the appropriate use of time are common in STM experiences. I remember one North American (a retired man who lived in the mission field, but was not a missionary by training or long-term experience) bawling out the Honduran men because they had not made preparations for the day’s activities by purchasing supplies the night before. “We have all of these people waiting with nothing to do.” How strange! If North Americans are task driven, Latinos are more in tune with relationships. Why would a worker take off time to be with his family during illness and risk his job with repeated absences?—because family is more important than work. This is a concept hard for those of us who have lived in the U.S. all our lives to understand. Standing around and visiting at the market while supplies are purchased is not wasting time—it is building relationships. I am amazed at the number of STM groups who (seemingly) purposefully avoid interaction with the local church. After all, we don’t speak their language, the service will be boring and we won’t get anything out of it. Show up early in the week, do a “gringo” think for midweek worship, and fly home on Sunday without visiting the local church. After all, we do have to be back to work on Monday, don’t we? Why are we there? Is it to do something, or to be something? How do ambassadors of Christ answer?

Problem-solving. Conflicts may arise concerning the best way to solve problems on the field. The danger is that we ride in on our white horses with white hats and bring solutions to every problem. After all, we have already solved the same kind of problem in our culture or our lives many times. Another example will help us. When we become aware of someone who is sick, what should we do? Are you more inclined to pray or to seek medical care? Are we bringing secular solutions or spiritual ones? Hopefully our answer is “both.” My experience, however, says that our hosts whom we have come to help are often more in tune with the spiritual world than are we.

Decision-making. Who will make the decisions for your STM team while it is on the field? Will you let the local church, or the resident missionary, guide your efforts, or do you already have everything in place? Who decides? The obvious answer is that the local brothers and sisters must have ownership of the work; they decide. We abide by their judgment. We are only helpers. The work is theirs.

Power source. A final area of conflict is focused in the question: on what (or whom) do we depend? Too many STMs are dependent upon the power of the group, upon human power, and we want to accomplish as much as possible while we are present. (Another evidence of our task-driven mentality.) My hosts often put my group to shame when it comes to dependence on God, and seeking his will and presence in prayer. My hosts often put my group to shame when it comes to depending on one another and understanding the nature of true Christian fellowship as described in the New Testament.

My purpose is that this discussion might renew your commitment to the power of STM efforts. I also wish that you might understand how necessary is deliberate spiritual preparation for effective STM trips.