

Asking Some Hard Questions about Short Term Mission (STM) Trips
by Bob Young
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Before the 2009 STM season gets into full swing, churches and individuals would do well to ask some hard questions of those who seek financial support from church treasuries for such efforts. The letters will begin arriving soon—spring break mission trips and a whole host of summer mission trips. One of the first questions to ask is, “What is the ‘mission’ of this ‘mission trip’?” Those who will provide financial support deserve to know the answer to that question.

It is true that the basic meaning of the word “mission” involves sending, but individuals seeking to go and churches being asked to send should ask, “Sent for what?” At the heart of the New Testament understanding of mission is that one goes forth sharing the gospel message, evangelizing, and making disciples. (Think of Paul’s missionary journeys.) Too many contemporary STMs have little obvious connection with the gospel, are not involved at all in evangelism, and sometimes have little appearance of going “in the name of Jesus.” Lest you think I am too harsh, let me remind that many secular organizations send people out every year to build houses, pour floors, play with children, improve living and sanitary conditions, teach agricultural techniques, etc. We should know the difference between what these organizations are doing and what the church is being asked to do.

What does it mean to go forth as a representative or ambassador of Jesus? Is it enough to go and do good things, knowing that we were at least in part motivated by the fact that we are Christians who have a heart for hurting people in other places? What expectation should exist that evangelism will be part of an STM? Have you observed, as I have, that a lot of mission trips would be more accurately funded from the benevolence or youth budget than from the mission or evangelism budget? I am not opposed to doing any good work (including giving a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus); all of the good things done and services provided are important. I am only suggesting that churches and individual Christians should know what they are being asked to support.

Let me begin by affirming that I believe in STMs. I have taken university groups on spring break trips numerous times. I have worked with many groups in trips of one to two weeks. I have witnessed the good that can be done and the long-term benefit both to those who go and for the local churches with whom we work. I have also seen STMs that failed to exert any influence for Christ. What is the difference?

First, individuals or groups that plan to participate in an STM must prepare before they go. Preparation increases effectiveness during the trip. What is done after the trip is over and one has returned home is even more important than what one does while gone. Summary: effective STMs are intentional and evaluated. Individuals or groups prepare, go, and return with the goals clearly in mind. Such STMs are spiritual experiences (see my article, “STMs as a Spiritual Exercise”, at www.bobyoungresources.com/missions/stm_spiritual-exercise.pdf). Preparation, especially for inexperienced mission participants or first-timers, will help all toward the goal of being Christ-like and sharing his love along the way.

Second, STMs should understand the limitations and develop reasonable expectations. A short-term mission is not a long-term mission. Different opportunities exist, different results come. Participants in STMs often do not speak the language. Many have never been out of the country before. Entering an unfamiliar new world with an entirely different culture presents new challenges. Questions and responses include: “Can I drink the water? I will sleep where? They eat what? I don’t know how to share the gospel.”

Finally, to assist churches who are being asked to support STMs, and to assist those who lead and participate in such trips, let me suggest some legitimate positive purposes of STMs. The items listed are in addition to the expected list of teaching and preaching.

- To build genuine relationships with members of the church the local congregation supports
- To build relationships with and to understand the culture and circumstances of the locals in the mission site
- To help future church leaders (youth, college students) see the opportunities and potential of missions, thus to open their eyes to the possibilities and to encourage the future involvement of the church in missions
- To help young people assess their own future involvement as a missionary
- To encourage and serve local missionaries
- To encourage local congregations
- To assist local congregations in doing what they could not do alone. This often involves some kind of humanitarian effort which reflects positively on the local church and opens doors for future evangelism and teaching. A good example of helping local churches is to teach Bible studies when the number of Bible study requests is greater than the local church can handle, for example, or to follow up on WBS students.
- To appreciate the way in which Christ sends and goes with Christians on such a trip
- To gain a basic understanding of missions, opportunities, and cultural differences or challenges (STM survey trips, conferences, etc.)

Of course, the list can be expanded. You should note that accomplishing these goals requires intentional preparation before the trip, insightful thinking and meditation during the trip and some debriefing process after the trip. Such a process also helps focus on the true mission—acting like the One we are calling people to follow, and avoiding actions that advance the “ugly American” stereotype.

Churches will do well to become better informed about short-term mission work. They will save themselves frustration and resources. They will be able to support those efforts that can advance the cause of the Kingdom most effectively. Many churches have developed policies for long-term mission support. Let me suggest that you do the same for short-term mission support. If I can be of help, feel free to contact me.

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