

Making the Most of Ministry Trips

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If you've been in any major airport in the last few years, you've seen them. If you're a youth worker, there's a good chance you've been one of them.

Clad in matching T-shirts, clutching passports and backpacks, this pale, ragtag army goes forth from the United States to locations all over the globe, but especially in the Caribbean and Latin America—the nearby (and pleasantly tropical) nations that receive the bulk of the 1.5 million Americans who go on international "short-term missions" annually. They are often on their first trip overseas. They've written letters, washed cars and worked overtime to raise the money to go. Their home church has prayed for them. Their family members have fussed over their sunscreen and medications. They sincerely are hoping to make a difference for Jesus in the world.

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Not all short-term mission teams are comprised of students; this is a phenomenon that cuts across generations. However, for many youth workers, fielding a short-term mission team has become part of the job description, not to mention making sure your church's short-term mission offerings don't fall too far behind the exotic destinations offered by the church down the road.

In 2006, I started to pay close attention to the burgeoning phenomenon of short-term mission trips. I spent that year interviewing leaders of Christian churches around the world—almost exclusively from outside the West. In nearly every interview, without prompting, I would be asked, "What exactly do you Americans think you are doing on these short-term mission trips?" I would stutter, and (in good journalist fashion) throw the question back to them. "Well, what do you think of them?" Then I would get an earful: stories of Americans who came to their country with a strange mixture of ignorance and arrogance; questions about T-shirt slogans, such as 'Bringing Jesus to Honduras' (a T-shirt that prompted a Honduran leader to ask, "Do Americans think Jesus isn't in Honduras until they get here?"); and lots of bemused stories of the relentless American desire to paint something, whether it needs painting or not—and whether the visiting Americans have painting skills.

Perhaps the most pointed observation came from Nairobi pastor Oscar Muriu. "You know," he told me in an interview for *Leadership Journal*, "after you leave, we repaint the walls that you have painted."

He was smiling, but he was serious. Strangely, after all those conversations, I've come to the conclusion that although short-term mission trips clearly are not the thing we Americans do best, they could be one of the best things we do.

The Best We Can Do

While "short-term" is true enough, "mission" is really not the best word for these journeys. For one thing, "short-term missions" is an oxymoron roughly akin to "jumbo shrimp."

The one true mission that animates the Christian story is God's mission (sometimes called by its Latin name, *missio Dei*), a history-sweeping, self-emptying endeavor to reconcile creation and Creator, about which there is nothing short-term. Even our small mission efforts should reflect God's mission in depth of commitment—as Eugene Peterson described as, "a long obedience in the same direction."

In an age of easy travel, missions may never again be as permanent and irrevocable as in the days when missionaries shipped all their worldly goods to their destination ahead of them—packed in a coffin. Any real investment in crossing cultures for the sake of the gospel will require much more time than the typical "short-term mission trip" allows.

A rule of thumb I picked up from cultural intelligence specialist David Livermore: If you aren't even trying to become fluent in the language of the people you are on mission among, you probably shouldn't call yourself a missionary.

Short-term trips (STMs) are contemporary versions of an ancient Christian practice called pilgrimage. (Perhaps we should call them STPs.) A pilgrim goes on a journey to meet God in a faraway place, hoping to return as a different person from the one who left. In medieval times, Europe particularly was crisscrossed with pilgrimage routes, with the destination usually being a notable church or site of a saint's relics.

Pilgrims had no illusions that they were going to "change the world" by their pilgrimage, but they hoped that being exposed to the world, and to the stories of the saints who had been faithful in it, would change them. They were much more than tourists, traveling simply for the fun of it (though medieval pilgrimages were often, appropriately, convivial and joyful affairs). Pilgrims travel for transformation, and that's a good thing.

Similarly, short-term teams travel together in community, where we actually depend on one another to make it through unfamiliar and challenging experiences. In a pervasive culture of individualism, that, too, is a good thing. When and where else will a typical 17-year-old embrace a life of prayer and work for a week or more, sharing cooking and cleaning, tears and laughter, in such close quarters? In a non-stop world of distraction and diversion, STMs force students (not to mention youth workers) to focus and pay attention.

Just as European pilgrimages served to reinforce pilgrims' connections to the saints who had been radically faithful to God in their place and time, modern STMs can take us to places of spiritual abundance. I have yet to visit a church in another part of the world

where I don't experience incredible, awe-inspiring discipleship. The local Christians may take their spiritual gifts for granted, but much of what I've experienced around the world would be categorically miraculous if it happened in my local congregation in Pennsylvania.

STMs whose destinations are places of material need also provide an indispensable reality check for affluent Americans. At their best, these trips can recalibrate our sense of what we need and awaken our compassion for people who have none of the comforts we take for granted. Even the manual labor we do on STM trips is not all bad: If the hardest work the kids in your youth group have done in the last year was handling video game controllers, sore muscles and a sunburned neck after a day of painting may bring about a reality check.

For all these reasons, if STMs didn't exist, I think we would need to invent them. Without STMs, our ministry to students easily could end up sealed in a bubble of individualistic consumer culture; and they would experience neither the astonishing abundance of the body of Christ around the world, nor the piercing pain of the least and the lost.

As vivid as the needs are that we see in places of material poverty, our need for these trips is greater than anything we'll see there.

After all, thanks to ubiquitous Western media, the friends we visit already know an awful lot about us and our affluent lifestyles. We are the ones who know very little about them.

When Pilgrimage Becomes Tourism

Unfortunately, STMs often fall short of these ideals; and when they do, these trips can undermine not just our own ministries, but the body of Christ in the places we visit. Without a commitment to transformation and learning, pilgrimage becomes tourism—as in the short-term team I heard about from one Caribbean leader who canceled the last three days of their Vacation Bible School program in order to spend more time on his island's lovely beaches. Tourism is no good for us spiritually, but it's worse for our hosts. They are demoted from saints to be celebrated, emulated and encouraged, to mere providers of lodging, meals and opportunities for us to feel good about ourselves.

If pilgrimage easily can become tourism, our call to sharing in the joys and sorrows of brothers and sisters around the world can devolve into mere voyeurism. Voyeurs, by definition, keep their distance. They lurk behind some form of protection that conceals their identity while ogling other people at their most vulnerable.

When we drive through neighborhoods where most people have no option but to walk; when we venture forth from the privacy of our guest quarters to places where people have no option but to live out the ugly consequences of poverty in public; when we bring gifts for local children that are cheap for us but more precious than anything their parents can afford to give them—as good or as guilty as any of these activities make us feel, they do nothing to establish real, trusting relationships with the people we think we are "serving." One of the most devastating moments in the student-produced documentary *Missio Docs: Mexico* is when a teenage STMer is asked what he enjoyed most about his trip, and he cites meeting Mexican kids his age. When asked to name a single Mexican he met, he comes up blank. The silence is deafening and damning—not of a well-intentioned, naïve 13-year-old, but of the leaders who failed to create an environment where real relationships could develop.

The Thing We Do Best

When you start to awaken to the huge investment and uneven returns from STMs, it's natural to ask if it wouldn't be better instead to raise money and send the cash to our partners overseas. Yet, not a single global church leader I've spoken to wanted to see that happen. They see the real potential of STMs: not the chance to get a wall painted, a latrine built or hold a Vacation Bible School but the chance to develop lasting relationships with other Christians.

In fact, so highly do most of our hosts value relationship, they simply cannot imagine that we would spend so much money and expend the effort that goes into an STM for anything other than building a deep, lasting friendship and partnership in the gospel. So, what exactly do we Americans think we are doing on these STM trips? Suppose we were able to tell our hosts and the people we serve honestly that we're pilgrims, not tourists; that our intent is to share their joys and sorrows, not to be voyeurs of their suffering; that we want to build relationship, not buildings.

Suppose we could tell them about our hope to help our students escape the clutches of our materialistic culture, with our hosts' help. Suppose our short visits were part of lasting partnerships between their churches and ours, with both parts of the body of Christ sharing our gifts and our needs.

Actually, if all that were true, I bet they'd never ask the question; and STMs really would be one of the best things that we do.