

SHORT TERMS:

Factors Not Often Considered...

by John Holzmann

Short-term missions are on the rise. Douglas Millham, director of World Vision's Cross-cultural Exchange Program, estimates that the number of short-term missionaries from North America increased over ten-fold between 1975 and 1987. Some experts predict the number of short-termers on the field will exceed career missionaries within the next five years. New research, new books, new agencies are all focused on short-term missions. While much is to be said in favor of the movement, Mission Frontiers' associate editor John Holzmann found some strong counter-opinions. Prospective short-termers would be well-advised to consider both sides.

Experts say there are two basic reasons to go on a short-term mission: for strategic service and personal growth.

Strategic Service

The most common short-term assignments have participants doing unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in order to free up mission funds and long-term mission personnel for the more specialized tasks for which their training has prepared them.

On the other hand, for some agencies with a militant perspective on short terms—Operation Mobilization (OM), for example, “short-term efforts are often seed-sowing enterprises conducted in areas where long-term work is hampered by visa restrictions.” That’s the perspective of Dave Hicks, North American coordinator and USA co-director of OM.

But beyond the strategic service they can provide, short terms have long been recognized as great vehicles for the personal growth of those who participate.

Personal Growth—Basic Discipleship

Ray Howard, Rocky Mountain regional representative for APMC, former short-term trainer with Inter-Varsity's Short-Term In Missions (STIM) program, and the current short-term coordinator at South Evangelical Presbyterian Fellowship, Inglewood, Colorado, said his church's concern is “for the short term to be a learning experience for the individual, . . . a reshaping of a life.”

Short terms reshape participants' lives by, among other things, opening their eyes to a world that's bigger than they ever imagined, exposing them to the needs of that world, and helping them to see that their mono-cultural concept of life and reality is much too narrow.

Youth With A Mission (YWAM) and OM, two of the oldest short-term agencies, use these eye-opening experiences to create, in Hicks's words, “an environment for accelerated growth in Christian character and effectiveness.”

But beyond whatever advantages may be found in building participants' basic skills and attitudes of Christian discipleship, short terms especially shine when it comes to developing mission vision and skills.

Personal Growth—Missions Discipleship

Nancy Bridgeman, director of Student Mission Advance of Hamilton, Ontario, claims that “only two or three out of every 100 who undertake to go to the mission field actually set out, whereas 25 out of every 100 involved in short-term service become life-long missionaries.”

And as far as she's concerned, there's a good reason for that. “We have effective role models in virtually every profession and the opportunity not only to read and hear about the demands and workings of each career, but also to assess first-hand our own potential involvement.”

In the area of missions, however, “people are expected to arrive automatically at life commitment” with nothing more to urge them in that direction than the testimony of missionaries far removed from their places of labor. Short-term missions rectify that situation. They give the needed opportunity for first-hand evaluation.

People on the inside of the mission industry point out that short-term experiences not only give missionary candidates the opportunity to discover what to expect if they join the agency and team with whom they work, but they allow the agencies and teams to see what kinds of people are applying to work with them.

Chuck Houston, a Christian high school Bible teacher, said he was glad he went on a short-term project two years ago. Not only did he feel the work he did was useful, but he discovered some worthwhile things about the team with which he was working: “My personality and the personalities of the people with whom I was working didn't mesh real well. If I had joined that team on a long-term basis, one of us would have had to leave. We would have come into conflict.”

Warren Day, director of personnel for AIM International, said that he and his wife had three short-term experiences before committing themselves to a career in missionary service. “We had a definite interest in long-term service, but we wanted to know the mission better. We wanted to understand more about the ministry and our ability to effectively function in a cross-cultural setting.”

Structural Problems

But despite the benefits—or potential benefits—of short-term service, it's not all roses in short-term land. In fact, to hear some people speak, you'd think there is nothing but thorns. The difficulties in short-term missions are both structural and strategic. Steve Hawthorne, executive director of Caleb Project and editor of *Stepping Out*, a guide to short-term missions (see p. 22), says the main problem with many short-term programs is that they are inadvertently structured to give participants “poor exposure to the world, to the work, and to missionaries themselves.” In the end, they “fail to expose people to the best of what missions can be and is.”

The Case of the Unnatural Missionary

As with cells whose shapes change the moment you try to mount them for study under a microscope, missionaries themselves and the entire mission enterprise in an area may be disrupted by the appearance of a short-term missionary or group.

Thus, while it is generally conceded that the best short term is one in which you can observe long-term missionaries doing their work, long-term missionaries are not necessarily equipped to meet the special needs that short-termers bring with them.

If, as has happened on occasion, their board requires them to sponsor short-termers, the short-term program can be an unbearable burden. “Five weeks every summer they are invaded by a group, half of which ought not to

have been allowed to come in the first place.” That’s the way Brent Lindquist, executive director of LINK Care Center, a missionary counseling center in Fresno, California, described it.

Friction develops between long- and short-term workers not only when career missionaries feel pressured into hosting short-termers they never wanted. It also develops when the two parties have different expectations about the purpose of the short-term visit.

If a short-term worker comes to the field hoping to see “what missions is like,” while the long-term worker understands the short-termer’s purpose is to help him any way he can, the short-termer may leave feeling he’s been used and abused.

Hawthorne, speaking from the perspective of a short-termer, said short-termers sent out with the long-term agencies “are often relegated to typing, filing, and babysitting.” Dave Sanford, chairman of the Cross-Cultural Studies department at Arizona College of the Bible, described the situation as short-termers being given “all the scut work.”

Of course, “relegation” and “scut work” are the kinds of terms people on the receiving end would use.

But while poor attitudes on both sides of the short-term issue can be accounted for and understood, the results must not be excused or overlooked.

Sanford, for instance, says he’s had to deal with several young people who have come back from a short term “totally burned out” by their experience.

But even in situations where a short-termer’s needs are foremost in the minds of those who care for him, even in situations where “scut work” may never be assigned, the very fact that a short-termer may be so protected could give him the wrong idea of what missions is all about. Sometimes missionaries have to do “scut work”—and they receive no special praise for doing it!

On the other hand, short-termers hardly need to be coddled in order to get the wrong idea of what kinds of spiritual ministries a missionary normally engages in. Due to their limited skills in language or theology, short-termers may be assigned to engage in forms of ministry the long-term missionaries never do.

For instance, the long-term missionaries in an area may normally have nothing to do with literature evangelism. That’s simply not their calling. But literature evangelism may be the one thing a short-termer is allowed and encouraged to do: it’s one of the few things he *can* do. In Hawthorne’s words, a short-term experience like that is exposing participants to precisely “what missions is not.”

Other short-term exposure problems:

Exposure to Need but Not to God’s Call

Short terms, of necessity, are action-oriented experiences that expose people to needs. Rarely, however, is this exposure to need accompanied by an emphasis on the missionary call. Participants, then, sense the need but fail to hear or understand the call. The result: an uncoupling of the mission enterprise from the call, and, ultimately, a weakened mission movement.

“People want to respond to needs,” says Hawthorne. “But if missions become all need-oriented, we’re going to have a collapse. We won’t have people going out because that’s what God wants them to do. They’ll go because it makes them feel good to ‘meet a need.’”

Exposure to Physical Rather than Spiritual Needs

Annette North, administrative assistant to the general director of Caleb Project, went one step further. Because they use people who lack language skills and other training, she said, short terms tend to address physical rather than spiritual needs. Thus, besides giving participants the idea that the need is what drives us to missions, short terms may also give them the wrong idea of what the need really is.

“The challenge of being out with a team, doing things hands-on, can give a person a feel for the need of missions. But it may give them a warped concept of missions, a tunnel vision of meeting physical needs. . . They’ll come back feeling challenged for doing something for missions, but it’s quite possible they won’t have captured the feel for the need of souls.”

Exposure to Reached Rather than Unreached Peoples

Hawthorne is concerned about another problem: “If anyone’s going to feel called to the world, it’s usually going to be where they first went. But try to find a short-term to India, or North Yemen, Egypt, Pakistan, Burma The places where we send short-termers are precisely the countries where we need missionaries least.”

Exposure on the Part of the Individual and Not His Congregation

Several new short-term agencies have come into existence recently because their founders noticed that, as Bill Jones of Student Mission Impact observed, “kids go off (on short terms), get fired up, but when they return, they have no support, no core group.”

“One of the great problems with short terms is that the people back home don’t want to walk through the experience with the individual,” said Howard.

Lindquist added, “Right now you get back to the local congregation and it seems that the people don’t care. The second Sunday night in October everyone parades their teams across the stage and that’s it.”

Above all else, this lack of communication to the church “back home” is what rankles Hawthorne the most.

“We can’t ignore the need for mobilizing the church,” he said. “Every short-termer should leave home prepared to not just report the travelogue and say a dutiful thank you, but also to agitate on the grassroots level in the church for greater commitment to missions. Anything less, to put it mildly, is indecent exposure.”

Event Rather than Process Orientation

When it comes to short-term missions, most people focus exclusively on the experience of being overseas, of being in another culture. Yet as natural as this focus may seem, if a person is not adequately prepared for and debriefed from the experience, he’s in for trouble.

“The short-term experience is a very unnatural, critical event in the life of the person, his family, and the life of the whole church,” said Hawthorne. “Too often it is shrugged off as of little significance. But there has to be facilitation (mentoring) before, during, and after the field experience.”

Short-termers and those who help them must make the time and expend the energy necessary to acknowledge, analyze, and digest the intellectual and emotional impact of the experience.

In terms of preparation, besides the practical matters of survival in another culture—matters that any traveler would want to know about—short-termers have special needs. “Motive-checking” is something Hawthorne believes short-termers need to be involved in. “Knowing the Lord” is something Sanford mentioned. Howard referred to “coping strategies.”

“You need a theoretical framework,” said Howard. “You need an understanding of why you’re going, an understanding of yourself and others, and an understanding of cultural differences—that God created cultures uniquely: ‘If I’m struggling with cultural differences, that’s God’s fault and it’s okay.’”

Sanford said preparation for a short-term experience is “like pre-marital counseling. Not that you’ll deal with every issue that may arise, but you’ll enable them to concentrate on the things that really matter—the things into which they need to put their energy.”

Howard recommends Marv Mayer’s book, *Christianity Confronts Culture* (Zondervan) and Tom and Elizabeth Brewster’s *Language Acquisition Made Practical* (LAMP) tapes as good resources for working on this theoretical (yet highly practical) framework.

Important as preparation may be, debriefing is even more so. “Debriefing is the key element that changes a short term from being just a two-week or summer job that fades into nice (or bitter) memories into a life-changing experience,” said Howard.

“Debriefing is an accountability structure that ensures that what needs to be done if I’m going to be effective will be done. As I walk through the (short-term) experience not only cognitively but affectively (emotionally), I can begin to understand why I reacted as I did, and I can say, ‘Lord, I need to learn some more about this area of my life.’”

Lindquist concurred: “In terms of skill-building, debriefing is very important.”

Sanford said debriefing should not wait until after one has returned home. It is something that needs to take place throughout the short-term experience. That’s why, he says, he goes with his students when he sends them on a short term. He wants to “maximize the teachable moments.”

“When you’re there with them at the moment of crisis, there’s a really different feel than if they’ve had an experience somewhere else and come back to you a month later.”

That’s also part of the reason he takes no more than eight people with him when he goes. He can’t handle more than that number: “You can’t have the same impact on 30 as you can on eight.” Further, “the kind of personal attention involved has its price tags. There are many nights you don’t sleep when a young person is working through something. It’s a real challenge.”

Strategic Problems

Well-structured short-term programs are rare. Fewer yet, however, are the people who go on short terms to achieve well thought-out, strategically valid purposes.

Warren Day notes that AIM finds very few people willing to be involved in its urban ministries here in the United States. “It’s the hardest job to fill.” The problem, he says, is that “there’s more excitement and interest in going to another continent. It’s not more valuable service, it’s just more appealing. People want to experience things that are radically different from what they know.”

God has called to another continent? No.

It’s more strategic to go to another continent? No.

It’s simply more appealing. More exciting. Exotic.

There are other false hopes and illegitimate purposes for getting involved in short term missions. Consider:

There Are Cheaper Ways of Improving Basic Discipleship

“You don’t need to go overseas for personal growth,” said Lindquist. “Go Outward Bound if that’s what you want.”

Said Howard in agreement: “A short-term experience is a real expensive way to get built up in basic discipleship.”

If You Need to Build Mission Skills, It is Quite Possible There Are Better and Cheaper Programs Closer to “Home”

“My 15-year old son is excited about a \$2400 (plus \$300 personal expenses) trip to Europe,” Howard confessed. “I’d rather see him go to Mexico for \$600.

“Kids go to Mexico and they have to deal with issues of poverty and affluence. And, especially for those who live in the Southwest, it’s real close: right there in their ‘backyard.’ Suddenly they’re confronted with the thought: ‘Hey, these people are of as much value to God as I am. Why has God so greatly blessed me and so greatly deprived them?’”

Cost-effectiveness is not the only issue. There’s also the matter of what one will learn from the trip.

Annette North said she found that, having grown up as an MK in India, a \$1500 short-term trip to Haiti in 1977 was far less helpful than a \$700 New York City-based Summer Training Program in Muslim Evangelism she participated in in 1985.

“For someone else,” she said, “going to Haiti and seeing the poverty would be a drastic shock and useful. But I’d already seen those kinds of things.”

The six-week program in New York City, however, “gave me training, cross-cultural exposure, and experience. It wasn’t a drastic shock and exposure to physical need, but more (an exposure to) socio-cultural and spiritual differences.”

Howard said that unless a short-termer is involved in a program that includes “hard-core evangelism” in which participants are “confronted with the spiritual realities,” it’s too easy for him to misunderstand what he has experienced. For instance, he said, short-termers may not see “the spiritual struggles in post-Christian Europe: the mosques—Islam wanting to take over Europe.”

Then too, “I’d rather send someone to Guatemala than to France. In Guatemala they’ll see the victory of the church in the face of oppression. In Europe they’ll just see despair. Or the glitter (of the physical environment).”

You Don’t Need to Leave Home to be Exposed to Another Culture

Speaking to an intense young man from Fresno, Lindquist quipped, “You say you really want to get to know the people? I’m sure it would help you to get to know some Panamanian orphan kids. But why not do that at home? Go to West Fresno.” The nations are coming to our doorstep. If we want cross-cultural exposure, few North Americans have to travel more than 10 miles to get it.

“Service” Alone is an Illegitimate Purpose

Lindquist told the story of a girl from his church who raised money to go to Australia for the summer. When she came back it came out that her primary job had been to help out in a church’s nursery during Vacation Bible School.

“We asked her whose kids she’d watched. ‘Mostly church people,’ she answered.

“I’m disconcerted about short-term efforts that, in terms of the long view—that was nice, but what did it do?”

We Can’t Go Simply to Make Our-selves Feel Good, Nor In Order to Say, “Now We’ve Done Our Part, We’ve Fulfilled Our Obligation”

Sanford says that North American Christians too often fail to consider whether their short-term projects are true service to the national churches or merely means by which they are “seeking to fulfill (their) own needs and dreams.”

“You take 50 high school kids and send them into a rural area to build a church: what does that say to the locals, the builders who see five months of possible employment go down the drain?”

Sanford believes national churches and pastors are “not responding the way people here (in the U.S.) think they are.”

Said Howard, “Each of us has to realize God values me as much as Psalm 139 says; He values everyone else to the same degree: I have no right to do my thing at their expense, nor to use them.”

The biggest danger in Hawthorne’s eyes is that Christians use their short-term experiences as excuses to slither around a full-blown commitment to missions. They “put their toe in the shallow end of the pool, find that the water is cold, and decide they don’t want to go in any further.

“They’re giving themselves deferments or ‘honorable discharges’ from future service because, supposedly, they’ve enlisted and ‘already done’ their tours of duty.”

If the church agrees that this “tour of duty” perspective is legitimate, he said, “I’m afraid we’ll become like the Mormons. Missions will become a rite of passage, a stage that everyone has to go through. If it’s just a stage, then it’s something you do, get it over with, and go on with life.” Missions, then, instead of being central to Christian life, becomes a side show, something to do when convenient.

As North put it, if the unreached are to be reached, they’re not going to be reached by part-time people, but by “people who have the big picture in mind, the big picture of life involvement either as a Sender or a Goer.”

Agencies and Churches May be Deluding Themselves When they Think Short-Term Programs Increase the Likelihood of Short-Termers Becoming Long-Term Missionaries

With all the false hopes that short-termers can bring to a program, it is possible that many agencies and churches that promote short-terms are involved in a bit of self-deception themselves.

It is becoming fashionable to point out the relatively high percentage of short-termers who end up as career missionaries. Lindquist wasn’t about to question those figures. He did point out, however, that “we don’t know how many of those who went on a short term and later became long-term missionaries were already convinced they should become long-termers before they went.”

And, Hawthorne added, “while most of the missionaries going career have been short-term missionaries first, we know this as well—that most of the 60,000 people who go on short terms each year never become career missionaries.”