

VOLUNTEERISM IN MISSION

Condensed from chapter 9 of a soon-to-be-published Introduction to Missions textbook, *Discovering Mission*, by Chuck Gailey and Howard Culbertson.

Roger Peterson, long-time head of the Fellowship of Short-Term Mission Leaders, has calculated that 1.6 million North Americans participate each year in various types of short-term mission.¹ Of that 1.6 million, about one third are doing “domestic” trips. Of the remaining two-thirds, about one-third of them go to Mexico. Other estimates of short-term participants range as high as four million North Americans with a total annual investment of more than four billion U.S. dollars.² In terms of numbers, getting people to do short-term mission has been hugely successful. Of course, raw numbers of participants and money spent do not tell everything. There is more to short-term mission than numerical totals.

- Is the activity of mission volunteers actually moving toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission or is it, in the words of *Macbeth*, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”?
- In what ways do career missionary teams see those volunteers as a burden? In what ways do they see them as a blessing?
- Which specific long-term goals can short term mission be helpful in accomplishing?
- What are positive and negative long-term effects on participants and sponsoring churches?
- In purely accounting terms, could money spent on travel and food and lodging be better spent by sending it straight to the mission field?

The Effectiveness of Volunteers

The modes of volunteer mission service are varied: weekend trips across a nearby border,

one- to three-week trips, college students participating in spring break and summer-long events, people spending six months to two years or more serving as individuals or couples (rather than in large groups), and a hybrid kind of volunteer service called tentmaking. These short-term mission participants cross cultural and geographic boundaries to use God-given skills and talents to do construction, teach English, set up computer centers, work in orphanages, fit eyeglasses, tutor missionary children, and help with disaster relief, evangelism, leadership training and medical work.

Many short-term mission participants receive minimal or even no cross-cultural training. Many do not speak the heart language of the people in the area where they go. Most participants are on-site for less than two weeks. Because of these and other issues, some have wondered how it is possible that short-termers can be of any lasting benefit for the world mission enterprise. Still, Kingdom effects of this huge number of people doing short-term mission can be seen in three ways:

1. Effect on the field

On the receiving end, the effects of short-term mission are both tangible and intangible. Given their obvious limitations, short term volunteers still accomplish some very visible things. Construction work gets done on buildings; neighborhoods become aware of a church in their midst; people are drawn into events where the Gospel is proclaimed; health care needs are met and church leadership gets needed training. Some of these short-term mission accomplishments are very quantifiable; others are not so easily expressed by statistical data.

Sometimes people look at the money being spent on transportation, housing and food and

wonder about cost-effectiveness. “Just send the money,” they say, assuming that transferring financial resources is the most important result of short-term mission trips. Actually, some of the most significant effects of short-term mission have nothing to do with money or even work on building projects. The relationships generated during short-term mission experiences may be more important for Kingdom purposes than the buying of concrete blocks or cement. Related to that is how short-termers help the host congregation recognize their connection to the global Church. Believers whose congregations have hosted short-term volunteers frequently talk about how the presence of a volunteer or a group from abroad gave them concrete evidence that they belonged to a global community of faith. A short-term team can also have energizing effects on a host church. When it sinks in to a congregation that the short-termers are giving of their time and paying for their own travel to work with them on a project, the effects can be both humbling and energizing.

In an ecclesiological sense, the short-term mission movement is a demonstration that the Church is globally the body of Christ where everyone’s gifts and talents can be put to use, sometimes across great distances. Such volunteering of one’s skills and talents for Kingdom work has been a fixture of most of church history. While the discussion of the Holy Spirit’s gifting in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 does not specifically mention construction skills, the recognition of craftsmanship skills as being from God is clearly stated in the Lord’s instructions to Moses concerning the Tabernacle: “I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you” (Exodus 31:6).

2. Effect on the Participants Themselves

The second set of effects of short-term mission concern the profound impact made on participants, or “goer-guests” as Roger Peterson calls them. On a strictly human level, short-term mission facilitates beneficial cultural exchanges. Another effect on participants confirms what the Bible says about the value of giving of oneself in service to others. During short-term mission trips, people experience first hand the Scriptural principle that it is more blessed to give than to receive. What frequently happens on mission trips is that those who have gone to minister are equally ministered to in reverse mission. Edward C. Lindeman noted how volunteer service often generates positive feelings of self-worth:

The act of volunteering is an assertion of individual worth. The person who of his own free will decides to work . . . is in effect saying, I have gifts and talents which are needed. I am a person who accepts a responsibility, not because it is imposed upon me, but rather because I wish to be useful. My right to be thus used is a symbol of my personal dignity and worth!³

One way that entering the ranks of mission volunteers enriches a person’s life is through changing one’s attitudes about prayer, mission giving and mission education. This showed up in research that James Engel and Jerry Jones did among Christian American Baby Boomers. After surveying professional Baby Boomers in American evangelical churches, Engel and Jones concluded that going on a mission trip changed how Boomers viewed world evangelism. Engel and Jones said their research showed that “spreading the gospel overseas as a ministry is a high priority among those who have been onsite overseas, those who are financial contributors to missions, and those engaged in personal evangelism.”⁴

Research by Roger Peterson and others has also shown that long-term shifts in attitudes

and actions occurred among many short-term mission participants. Peterson's research indicated that mission trip participation generally resulted in a doubling of prayer life and financial giving to missions. That same study also indicated a substantial increase in involvement in mission-related support activities.⁵ Mission agencies say that significant numbers of new missionaries report receiving their missionary call during a short-term mission trip. To be sure, not every participant on a ten-day mission trip is dramatically transformed. In that regard, going on a mission trip parallels how participating in a youth camp or a men's retreat affects people. For an occasional participant there will be striking positive changes; for most others who are positively impacted, the changes are smaller. The changes, however, are usually incremental so the more short-term mission experiences people have, the more likely it is that they will experience noticeable, permanent changes.

3. Effect on the sending church

How mission trips affect the sending church may be the least obvious of the three categories of short-term mission effects. A lot of money comes out of local churches to transport short-term mission participants to and from a destination as well as feeding and housing them while there. The home church begins receiving dividends from that investment when the spiritual fervor of returning participants ignites new passion within the local church. David Hayse, who coordinated hundreds of short-term mission teams, has asserted that short-term mission trips "have made an incredible impact on the sending church."⁶ Many sending churches experience ripples of positive effects before and after having members participate in short-term mission trips. Excitement is generated within the local church as volunteers prepare to go and then after

they come home. As trip stories are told and retold, sending congregations often gain a renewed sense of “ownership” for the world mission task. This shifts congregations’ concentration away from a maintenance mindset and toward the fulfillment of their global covenant responsibilities. As lay people put their gifts and talents to use in world evangelism, there is often renewed recognition in the home church of how believers need to function together as the Body of Christ. The mobilization of prayer support for the trip will often have positive side-effects for the sending congregation. A burden and passion for lost people in another part of the world may get people thinking about the lost of their own city. As Engel and Jones noted, there is a link between involvement in personal evangelism and a passion for world evangelism. Churches that have people regularly going on short-term mission trips also often become leaders in overall financial support for world evangelism. As in the case of individuals, the changes in sending churches rarely are seismic shifts. More often the changes will be incremental with increasing impact as more and more church members have short-term experiences. The effect that short-term mission has on sending churches is one answer to those wondering why all the money is spent on the trip rather than just being sent to the mission field. Of course, the question is a moot one anyway because money spent on mission trips is almost always “new” money for global mission.

The Downside

There is a downside to mission volunteerism. Every mission organization has stories of disastrous volunteer experiences that include people not being adequately prepared, of groups destructively pushing their own agendas, and of inappropriate behavior that set back a church’s

witness. Volunteer mission can be done in ways that obscure important, long-term mission goals. Some trips are over-hyped in terms of what can be accomplished or what has been done in one or two weeks. Short-term mission can mistakenly be presented as the primary way the Great Commission will be fulfilled. Sometimes, short-term mission participants do not really comprehend that they are just one link in a chain of evangelism, discipleship, and church planting events. Short-term mission participants may erroneously think they are the all-important climax of a project rather than the seed-planting. That opens up things to the danger of letting the desire to accomplish something visible here and now be what determines the overall mission agenda.

It is not uncommon for short-termers to express disappointment that they did not “accomplish” more. What they have failed to see is that the changes in themselves and the accomplishments on the field tend to be in small increments rather than paradigm-shifting revolutions. With short-term mission activity there is also a significant risk of creating dependency attitudes within the receiving church. There is the danger of amateurization of a mission strategy, where priorities and programs wind up being determined by people with little training or cultural sensitivity and only limited experience on a given mission field. Sometimes, that desire for highly visible results has even led to the creation of an almost artificial “need” so that volunteers will have something to do. Because there are always so many new people coming in to short-term mission, the perpetual doing of very elementary training can make it seem like the wheel is having to be re-invented every two weeks.

On occasion, self-centeredness, paternalism or ethnocentrism causes short-term mission volunteers to do things without the knowledge of or against the wishes of the host church,

necessitating damage control and even an occasional complete re-doing of construction projects after the group leaves. Some short-termers have signed up thinking they were going on a sight-seeing trip that would have a little spiritual flavoring. Other people go on short-term trips seeking the emotional rewards of their own hands-on involvement rather than looking for ways to invest in long-term empowerment. Participants sometimes go on a trip primarily because a friend is going. The participants of two-week mission trips must not be exalted as the star players in world evangelism. While the overall impact of short-term mission has been significant, there have been some “excursion missionaries” created who feel that tremendous fulfillment of the Great Commission has occurred because they made a two-week trip somewhere, a feeling that is a slap in the face to missionaries giving decades of their life to global mission.

For these and other reasons, going on a mission trip is not a positive experience for every participant or even every group or team. Sadly, a few even come home embittered by the experience. Sometimes there is bad team chemistry and people return home upset at each other. Sometimes there are clashes with field missionaries or national leaders that do not get satisfactorily resolved. Sometimes there is inappropriate behavior on the part of team members occasioning the need to send someone home early.

As the movement began gathering momentum one concern was voiced that has turned out to be less of a problem than was feared. In those early years, there was concern that such trips would drain money away from other mission needs. That has not happened in the way people feared because most of the people going on short-term mission do not pay for trips with money they planned to give to missions; they use their own “vacation” money. So, people wanting to conjecture how that one to four billion dollars could be “better spent” need to realize that this is

not money that would be given to global mission if short-term mission trips were abolished tomorrow. In many cases, short-term mission has increased mission giving as people come home burdened for specific projects or ministries.

Standards of Excellence

A few years ago short-term mission leaders in Great Britain and Canada drew up a list of characteristics indicative of good short-term mission experiences. Building on what the British and Canadians did, the U.S.A. Fellowship of Short-Term Mission Leaders created a set of Standards of Excellence which it began promoting as marks of sound short-term mission:

1. God-Centeredness
2. Empowering Partnerships
3. Mutually Agreed-Upon Design
4. Comprehensive Administration
5. Qualified Leadership
6. Appropriate Training
7. Thorough Follow-Up

Longer-term short-term volunteers

As the numbers of participants on short-term mission trips have increased over the last few decades, remarkable things happened. One of them was that short-term volunteers began saying, "I don't want to go home after two weeks or a summer. I have a skill and time and money. I want to come back as soon as possible." Those short-termers began returning to mission fields to serve as volunteers for periods of up to two years. A positive thing for the career missionary is that mid-term volunteers do not need as much direct supervision as a team that is only on-site for one week. The longer time frame gives more opportunities to learn culture and language. Thus, those mid-term volunteers, as Miriam Adeney has called them, can usually assume more significant ministry roles than is possible for those who are on a field for only ten days.

Retirees

In many countries, people are able to retire from the work force while continuing to receive an income. As they retire, they are faced with deciding what to do with the productive years they feel are still ahead of them. In an *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* article entitled “Boomers, Busters and Missions,” Ken Baker noted that numbers of American evangelicals fifty years of age or older are giving themselves to a second career in missions.⁷

Pre-Career Volunteers

Spending a year or two in volunteer mission service has attracted college and university students wanting to do hands-on cross-cultural ministry before beginning their careers and families. The U.S. government fanned an interest in volunteerism with its creation of the Peace Corps and Americorps. In Britain taking a “gap year” between graduation and beginning one’s career has been a long tradition. Those kinds of programs gave young adults a way to see the world while they sought to meet social needs. The government programs, plus the example provided by young Mormon volunteers, gave churches and mission agencies models for providing young adults in-depth mission experiences. Thus, in addition to those going to a mission field as volunteers for one to two years right after they graduate and before they launch into their career, some are taking a semester or even a year off during college to serve as mission volunteers.

There are pros and cons of sending young adult volunteers to serve alongside older career missionaries. One drawback is the volunteers’ lack of life and career experience. Another may be their own lack of understanding of how their behaviors, habits and personality may provoke negative responses in another world setting. As Craig Sheppard, missionary to Kosovo, has noted, “Short-termers hold the integrity of the gospel and the ministry of the church in their hands. I have seen and experienced volunteers compromise the integrity of the ministry.”⁸ The positive side is that young adults tend to be flexible (a characteristic needed in cross-cultural mission) and willing to adapt to new situations. Even when they fall short of the high expectations they have of what God can do through them in a year or two their enthusiasm to change the world can be contagious. Their presence sometimes may push those with whom they minister to be more open and radical in sharing the gospel than they would otherwise.

Volunteer service for a year has the potential to produce more lasting change in a person than will a ten-day trip. This is one reason why mission agencies need to offer significant mid-term opportunities for young adults. Factors in the difference between success and failure of young, mid-term volunteers include how self-motivated they are, whether they feel they are part of something significant and how thoroughly they understand what is expected of them. When young adults have positive mission experiences, the ripples from that will influence the church for years to come. It is not uncommon to hear of full-time missionaries receiving their call while serving as a mid-term volunteer.

Tentmakers

A group of hybrid longer-term mission volunteers is known as Tentmakers. While other volunteers use savings or raise funds from friends and family and take time off from school or jobs to go on short-term mission trips, tentmakers fund their mission experience by taking a

secular job in another world area with the intention of doing mission work in their free time. There is a continuum of options between having a full-time tentmaking job and being totally supported by donors or churches in one's home country. William Carey himself did some "tent-making" as he ran indigo processing plants and other business operations in India. Tentmaking is also a way to do mission in Creative Access areas where visas are not issued to those doing missionary ministry in traditional ways. The downside to being a tentmaker missionary is that much of a person's day and energy is soaked up by a secular job.

One example of a tentmaker missionary was Kim Sun Il, a Korean kidnapped by insurgents in Iraq in 2004. Kim was in Iraq earning his living working for a South Korean firm and then doing evangelism during his free time. He was highly educated with college degrees in English, theology and Arabic. His passion for mission work among unreached peoples led him to the dangerous task of working and ministering in a war zone. He had been in Iraq for a year when he was kidnaped by *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'l Jihad* (in English, "Monotheism and Holy Struggle") terrorists. They threatened to kill him and released video footage of him pleading for his life. Sadly, after a month in the hands of his kidnapers, Kim's beheaded body was recovered outside of Baghdad. His killers posted an Internet message which read, "We have killed an infidel who tried to propagate Christianity in Iraq."⁹

Tentmaking should not be viewed as something less than the ideal which is done mainly to get people into "closed countries." Indeed, people's professional training and abilities may give them opportunity to minister in strategic settings in "open" as well as "closed" countries.

Evaluating Mid-Termers

Douglas Terry did his doctoral dissertation on the effectiveness of longer-term or mid-term volunteers who have spent from six months to two years on a mission field. Terry's project tried to evaluate the mid-termers' effectiveness by surveying them and the career missionaries and local Christians with whom they had served. According to Terry,

Any mid-term missionary who contributed significantly to a mission ministry and its goals, witnessed effectively about Christ, was satisfied with his or her ministry, was deemed suitable for this ministry, was able to communicate adequately with those ministered to, had a good relationship with at least one on-site career missionary, had a good relationship with at least one on-site national Christian, and the recipients of whose ministry were satisfied with it, is by definition effective missionally.¹⁰

From this list of characteristics or variables Terry developed a Missional Effectiveness Index, or MEI as he labeled it. He then correlated people's Missional Effectiveness Index scores with a number of other variables. All of the top three variables showing up in Terry's study have to do with communication and relationship. The most important variable that contributed to Missional Effectiveness for mid-term volunteers was language communication skills.¹¹ Cultural adaptation, which is inextricably tied to language learning, was the second most important variable in the high MEI scores. The third most important factor was the development and maintenance of good interpersonal relationships. The fourth was spiritual readiness. Terry's study also indicated that age was a significant variable. His research showed that mid-termers who had the best missional effectiveness scores were between 55 and 64 years of age.¹²

Most mid-termers discover that their two years or so of volunteer service go by very fast. They find themselves just starting to connect with people when it is time to leave. Thus, they

need to be intentional about training others to do what they are doing or else their involvement and contributions will not continue after they leave. Because of the significant missionary ministry which mid-term volunteers have had, some mission agencies include them in the number of “missionaries” they report. Some mid-term volunteers have even made seamless transitions into career missionary service.

Kingdom Work Gets Done Too!

Stan Guthrie summed up well the impact of short term mission:

“Short-term work, whether two weeks or two years, can indeed be effective and pleasing to God. Yes, it can cost a lot of money, disrupt nationals and missionaries, encourage short-term thinking, and inoculate some against career missions involvement. But done well, it can open participants’ eyes to the sometimes gritty realities of the world, make them aware of their own ethnocentrism and the gifts and courage of non-Western believers, and spark a lifelong commitment to missions. In the best cases, some real kingdom work gets done, too”¹³

END NOTES

1. Roger Peterson, Opening presentation. Annual conference, Fellowship of Short-Term Mission Leaders, Atlanta, Georgia (October 11, 2006).
2. Kurt Ver Beek, “Assessing the Impact of Short-Term Missions,” paper presented at the North Central Region meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society, April 9, 2005 (Deerfield, Illinois).
3. Julietta K. Arthur, *Retire to Action: A Guide to Voluntary Service* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 38.
4. James Engel and Jerry Jones, *Baby Boomers and the Future of World Missions* (Orange, California: Management Development Associates, 1989), 23.
5. Roger P. Peterson and Timothy D. Peterson. *Is Short-Term Mission Really Worth the Time and Money?* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: STEM Ministries, 1991), 28.
6. David Hayse, Interview, December 10, 2001.
7. Craig Sheppard. E-mail to Howard Culbertson. September 13, 2006.
8. Reuben Staines, “Church Leaders Condemn ‘Religious Killing’ of Kim Sun-il” *The Korea Times*, July 15, 2004.
9. Douglas W. Terry, "Short-termers over the Long Run: Assessing Missional Effectiveness of Non-Career, Mid-term Nazarene Missionaries," Unpublished Dissertation, 2002, Asbury Theological Seminary. 10.

10. *Ibid*, 199.

11. *Ibid*, 201.

12. Ken Baker, "Boomers, Busters and Missions: Things are Different Now," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, volume 33, number 1 (January, 1997), 70-77.

13. Stan Guthrie, *Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2000), 89.