

Go Missions to Mexico

Seven Principles for Highly Effective Short-Term Missions

By Mike Stachura

Everyone's doin' it! Short-term missions, that is. There seems to be an unprecedented enthusiasm for short-term mission trips in all shapes and sizes. And therein lies a problem. With all forms of trips, ministries, and experiences now falling under the title "short-term missions," it's getting very difficult to determine what is short-term missions.

Short-termers are getting a lot of "hard press" these days. Terms like "glitz and blitz," "hype," "run and gun" are now used to describe many of the current efforts, especially to reach the former Soviet Union and East Central Europe. Some see short-termers as actually counterproductive to the goal of world evangelization. What is most needed, however, is clear recognition of the difference between serious short-term programs and glorified overseas sightseeing trips.

What does make an effective short-term missions effort? Based on my experience in Operation Mobilization, let me suggest seven principles for highly effective short-term missions, which I believe embody many features of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Clear and Prayerful Strategies

Many good models exist for short-term ministry. Examples include Scripture and Christian literature distribution and assistance in the construction of church, medical, and educational facilities. Short-term efforts that are prayerfully and carefully thought through, with clear communication beforehand to national church leaders and/or longer-term missionaries, serve as powerful sources for new evangelistic initiatives, the encouragement of local believers, and the equipping of national leaders. Regular group intercessory prayer before going to the field helps discern God's strategy, making the teams better able to adapt as He directs.

Prayer undergirded the ten-person team which headed toward Novosibirsk, Siberia, for a summer of outreach in 1991. Eighty visas had been applied for, but only ten were approved. The team prayed for and recruited bilingual translators from the local university, only one of whom was a Christian. At the end of the summer, only one of the

translators was not a Christian. Today, OM, in partnership with the Navigators, ministers together with more than 50 national believers in a new fellowship in Novosibirsk.

Leaders of Character and Competence

Nothing is more critical to the success of a short-term missions team effort than having a leader of mature, godly character who has the gifts, abilities, and experience to guide a cross-cultural team. George Verwer puts it this way: "We must have people who are disciplined. It's going to be rough. It's going to be tough. Their hearts are going to be broken. We need people who are spiritual fighters....We can't really do much with gospel wimps on the mission field" (Verwer: 1994).

A Learner's Attitude

From the very beginning, all short-termers must be committed to learning as much as possible (before going!) of the language, culture, history, church, and mission situation in the city or country they're visiting. Short-term missions involves an ongoing commitment to deepen one's spiritual life and to learn the content of the gospel to be communicated in the context of the culture. It means learning from national believers and more experienced missionaries. It means avoiding the posture of "knowing what needs to be done." It means more listening and less talking.

There are numerous excellent resources available to any church, group, or individual who's contemplating going on a short-term mission team. There are also excellent organizations with a long track record of practical steps on how to prepare for, go, and return with lasting results from mission trips. Such groups are eager to assist and offer practical training for those going to the field.

A Servant's Spirit

Nothing is more damaging to cross-cultural missions, short-term or long-term, than a patronizing, paternalistic attitude. Paul came determined not to present himself, but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. As for Paul, he wanted to be known as Christ's bondservant ("doulos"). A servant's spirit starts in the home church or group with a willingness to do whatever is asked. It is reflected in the team life where all members are willing to take their share of the workload. It means esteeming others, particularly national Christian workers, as better than ourselves.

Partnership

Short-term efforts generally fail when they are not vitally linked with the efforts of a national church or longer-term mission. Short-term work should be a great complement and supplement, not substitute, to existing long-term work. National church leaders often ask for short-term teams to help them out. It is precisely this type of strategy that has worked so effectively for the ships Logos II and Doulos, for our teams in Russia and East Central Europe, and especially for our largest land-based work in India (McQuilkin: 1994). The focus is on building a "both-and" approach that uses both the efforts of short-term mission and long-term follow-up.

The Novosibirsk outreach continues because of the commitment by both the Navigators and OM to see a self-propagating, mature, disciplined fellowship established in Siberia. Partnership in short-term efforts has led to a deeper link on a long-term basis.

Commitment to Ongoing Ministry

"Been there; done that" is not an acceptable philosophy for short-term missions. While vision trips can stimulate genuine enthusiasm, lead to new ministry opportunities, and even encourage local believers, a real danger exists of creating false expectations, particularly in the host culture. Launching a short-term missions team means accepting responsibilities either to keep on sending teams as needed or ensuring that a proper foundation is laid for leaving the work in the hands of competent national Christians.

In Durres, Albania, an OM short-term team of three entered in 1991 with a commitment to learn the language and culture, to start three Bible-study groups, and to see a fellowship of believers commence. Within a year, they were well into the language, had started 12 groups (with several national Albanians helping to lead), and worked with a partnership of a dozen or so agencies in a large evangelistic campaign in the city stadium, and were involved in two new fellowships resulting from that larger effort. Today, more than 120 national believers in Durres meet regularly for worship and Bible study, and are planning short-term evangelistic outreaches to remote mountain villages.

A local church near Atlanta has sent over one-third of its members into the former nation of Yugoslavia under the theme, "On the Road to Sarajevo." While they have not yet established a permanent church-planting effort in Sarajevo, the Lord has led them to be involved in relief efforts, refugee ministries, evangelism to youth and the elderly, and a host of dynamic opportunities.

Christ-Honoring Communication of Results

Perhaps it's a Western cultural penchant for numbers, plans, and quick results. Or, perhaps it's an untamed ego which takes more credit for spiritual harvest than is merited. Whatever the cause, nothing is more dishonoring to Christian missions than exaggeration and self-congratulation over perceived results of short-term ministry. Short-term reporting must repent of "hype." To start with, realistic expectations of goals for a short-term team should be stressed. Groups must report real results that have been checked out carefully, with integrity and humility uppermost in mind. Short-termers often are painfully aware of their own inadequacies. When shortcomings are honestly admitted they help underscore the truth that humility still is a powerful message in a world waiting to hear the Good News.