




Short-term Missions for Long-term Partnership

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Say what you will about the benefits of short-term missions, but there's a strong case to be made that it is shifting in the wrong direction. The lines between short-term missions and global tourism have blurred and that at a time when "slum tourism" is on the rise.

"'Slum tourism' stirs controversy in Kenya," a newspaper announced. The report describes the bitter irony of the rising number of tourists to the Kibera slum with little benefit to its inhabitants. According to the report, at least one travel agency has added Kibera to its list of tours.

Tourists or God's missionary people?

Even more troubling than the existence of slum tourism is the fact that it may easily be confused with short-term missions (STM). In many ways STM is already equated with tourism. What do you call it when people with the time and money travel to a foreign country for a week or two? Missions experts have discovered that research on tourism can inform STM (Adeney, 2006). Indeed, missions researchers are encouraged to dialogue with their tourism counterparts.

I have no quarrel with tourism or with learning from it. But is the promise of short-term missions a Christianized version of tourism; experiences to awaken the unscarred and overfed to their privilege? Are we tourists or are we God's missionary people?¹

STM enthusiasts brush off the question to the peril of North American missions. What is God's intention through the short-term mission movement? Is it to make us better tourists or better witnesses of his grace? Will the spectacle of short-term missions reveal us to be God's missionary people or the plutocrats of globalization?

If the short-term mission movement is the work of God, its purpose is to enable the church to be the church in today's global neighborhood. The church is called to announce Christ, love her neighbors and put God on display. It has no other identity and no other agenda.

Like all of God's gifts, STM is an opportunity that requires stewardship. The people of God may make the most of it or not. The movement may cultivate authentic fellowship in the gospel or result in little more than tourism.

STM is at a tipping point and the forces of tourism appear to be winning. A growing body of research suggests STM is not delivering on its promise.

- Short-term missions tend to reinforce stereotypes and deepen misconceptions about the poor. (Priest, et al, 2006, Linhart, 2006, Livermore, 2004, Ver Beek, 2006).
- A short-term experience is as likely to increase ethnocentrism as decrease it. (Priest, et al, 2006, Linhart, 2006).

- Whether STM experiences abroad improve interethnic relationships at home is unclear (Priest, et al, 2006).
- People with extensive STM experience are no less materialistic than those with none (Priest, et al, 2006).
- Short-term missions have little appreciable impact on giving. It does not appear to have increased financial support for career service and may be siphoning money away (Priest, et al, 2006, Ver Beek, 2006).
- Short-term visitors are less prepared to share the gospel than local Christians (Birth, 2006, Ver Beek, 2006).
- STM has less positive impact on those they serve than do local groups providing the same services (Ver Beek, 2006).
- STM may be more a burden than a help to Christians in the host culture (Baar, 2003, Van Engen, 2000, Zehner 2006).

We know what's wrong with short-term missions. They're short. It's the brevity that reinforces stereotypes, perpetuates misperceptions about the poor, and feeds the quick-fix mentality. It's the brevity that leaves local Christians feeling shortchanged. The very notion that missions can be short plays into tourism. Although mission researchers are quick to emphasize that better preparation and coaching will reduce negative effects, it is not simply a problem of preparation (Priest 2006, Linhart 2006).

The problem reaches to the very core of the movement's identity and purpose. How is STM part of God's agenda for the church?

The answer lies not in tourism but in the fellowship of the gospel, not in short-term excursions but in long-term commitments as members of God's extended family (Eph. 2:19-22).

Claiming the promise of short-term missions

If we are to realize the promise of short-term missions they must be made subordinate to, and at the service of, long-term relationships in the work of the gospel.

While there are no easy answers to effective partnering, short-term missions serve long-term partnership when:

1. The fellowship of the gospel is at the center of relationships with Christians abroad. The term *fellowship* in the New Testament refers primarily to participating in something, not merely sharing something in common with others. It refers to the kind of relationship in which you have something to gain and something to lose. STM serves long-term partnership when it is rooted in a relationship