

A Critical Perspective on Short-Term Missions

Sarah Bunyea

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2015

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Dr. Kendrick Brunson, DBA
Thesis Chair

Dr. Colleen McLaughlin, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Dr. Don Fanning, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Marilyn Gadowski, Ph.D.
Honors Assistant Director

Date

Abstract

There is a growing number of participants going on short-term mission trips from the North American church. There are many criticisms of short-term mission trips, including that they are planned around tourism and completing projects, rather than learning from the people in the communities being visited and sharing in their own Christian ministry. One reason for this is that false promotional messages from churches and mission organizations give participants wrong perceptions of the purpose of these trips, creating market demand for tourists who want to help the poor. Mission organizations and churches not only need to change the structure of short-term mission trips, but also the messaging in order to attract the right target market and show participants more appropriate reasons for going on such trips. With these changes, short-term missions will better benefit both participants and the people being visited.

A Critical Perspective on Short-Term Missions

Background of Short-Term Missions

For anyone raised in the North American church or familiar with Christian culture, the short-term mission trip is not a new idea. Many church congregations, Christian high schools and colleges and faith-based organizations lead short-term mission trips across the globe. These trips are usually one to two weeks in length and typically focus on completing projects, such as building houses, digging wells, providing medical assistance, teaching English and running local Vacation Bible Schools.

The number of people going on these trips has greatly increased over the past two decades. With only 125,000 participants in 1989, this number grew to approximately 1.6 million participants in 2008 (Ver Beek, 2006; Wuthnow, 2009). The number 1.6 million came from surveying church members over the age of eighteen, and it is likely that this number is underestimated. There are more likely around 2 million people going on these trips per year (Howell, 2012). The National Study of Youth and Religion estimates that 20% of 15-20 year olds in the United States have either taken domestic or international mission trips or participated in religious service projects (Probasco, 2013).

The popularity of short-term missions is partly due to globalization and the growth of technology, which allows for increased ease of coordinating international travel. These factors, combined with youths' growing desire for travel, adventure and experiencing new cultures, have turned short-term missions into a wildly popular Christian activity (Raines, 2008). These trips are prevalent because they often provide a meaningful experience for the participants and are believed to be a good way of helping others who are poor and have physical or spiritual needs. Travelers commonly expect that

they will have powerful spiritual experiences that will deepen their faith, change the way they see the world, and influence how they live their life.

Problems with Short-Term Missions

Mission organizations and churches promote false messages when marketing the purpose of short-term mission trips. Their advertising attracts participants who are interested in experiencing adventure, offering their help to the poor and less fortunate and deepening their own faith. Messaging does not emphasize the importance of learning from and about the native country's Christians and their current ministries. Short-term mission trip participants then travel with wrong motivations, which can cause more damage than good in the mission field. The result is a seriously flawed and unequal exchange between Christians of two cultures, with the trips mostly benefitting the participants.

Changing Short-Term Missions

Promotional messages churches and mission organizations use to market short-term mission trips encourage participants to go on trips for reasons that largely benefit themselves. There are major flaws within the current structure of short-term mission trips, potentially harming people in communities that are being visited by short-term mission teams. Churches and North American Christians need to structure and advertise trips in a way that are about *being* with Christians from other countries, rather than helping fix their problems. A better, more appropriate message for short-term mission organizations and churches should be used to promote a trip with the purpose of learning and gaining perspective. This will attract the right participants who will go with the right motivations and expectation of outcomes. The result may be fewer short-term mission trip

participants, but this will produce more effective results that have greater long-term benefits for the participants and the communities being visited.

Current Messaging

The promotional messaging that churches and mission trip organizations use gives participants expectations of what they will experience on the trip and the purposes for going on such trips. Common messaging themes include going on trips for adventure, serving, ministering, loving on people and growing in personal faith. The following examples are taken from the websites of mission organizations and churches in the United States.

Mission Organizations

Many mission organizations exist who specialize in organizing and planning short-term mission trips for both individuals and groups. Adventures.org, an interdenominational mission organization, stated on their website in an advertisement for a short-term trip to the Dominican Republic,

Indigenous religious customs steeped in witchcraft still thrive in the villages of the DR. Most Dominicans need to encounter Jesus in a fresh way. **You can bring that new life to the DR.** With education topping the needs in the DR, your team could help in many ways. Your team will spend their first week learning how to use skits and reach out to the community in various ways...Come enjoy an adventure amidst the beauty of the DR's mountains, forests, and sandy beaches as you deepen your faith and share it with the youth of this nation. **Be the face of Jesus to the Dominican Republic!** ("Dominican Republic," n.d., para. 3)

This example first emphasized the need of the Dominican people and how the trip members were there to help fill that need and *bring new life*. The messaging emphasized the adventurous aspects of the trip and that it would help deepen the faith of the participants. Experience Mission is a similar interdenominational short-term mission organization. Their website said,

Some feel a nudge to be a part of something that benefits someone else. Others seek out a mission trip for the adventure of new things and the hope of personal growth. They have a desire to see, experience and discover their faith in new and meaningful ways. We believe that Christian mission trips are about both of these ideas. (“Experience Mission,” n.d., para. 1)

Helping others, growing in faith and seeking adventure were suggested as valid purposes for short-term mission trips. Both of these mission organizations’ messages focused on the specific benefits the trips would give team members. They did not reference much about the people on the receiving end, except that they were in need of the teams’ help.

Churches

Churches are another common place where people learn about short-term missions are recruited for trips. Churches of all denominations offer global short-term mission opportunities for adults, families and youth group members. Church of the Highlands, a nondenominational megachurch in Birmingham, Alabama, advertised a trip to Nepal on their website using the message,

Get out of your box and take the trip of a lifetime to the rooftop of the world.

Highlands will partner with The Footstool Project to carry hope to the disadvantaged children of the Himalayas and minister to unreached people while

taking in the world's most breathtaking scenery. On this amazing trip you will experience a deeper understanding of God's heart for the unreached. ("Church of the Highlands," n.d., para. 1)

A similar example is from Lakewood Church, a nondenominational megachurch in Houston, Texas, who stated in an advertisement for a trip to Lebanon, "Minister the message of hope and love to Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Come share your love for Christ with others, offering physical psychological and spiritual healing to people in the Middle East" ("Lakewood Church," n.d., para. 1). Both of these messages from Church of the Highlands and Lakewood Church focused on what the team would offer others, like hope, love, healing and ministry. Because the messages focused on what the team had to offer, it implied that the people being visited were in a lower position, disadvantaged and in need of healing and help. They did not describe any benefits the people being visited could offer the team members, such as learning from people who hold a different worldview perspective. These messages are not unique to these two churches and can be read on websites of churches and heard in person in church services across North America.

Motivations for Going

These messages that are commonly found in short-term mission trip marketing were seen in the responses of trip participants when asked about their motivations for going on trips. Brian Howell, anthropologist and professor at Wheaton College, conducted research over a two-year period about the short-term mission narrative. He studied common narrative used during pre-trip, trip and post-trip interviews with students

going on trips, studying common words and expressions students used to frame their experiences and feelings about the trip (Howell, 2012).

Answering a Call from God

Even though students were encouraged by youth group leaders to sign up for particular trips, the *correct* motive for choosing to go was framed as a missionary call rather than a personal choice. Students framed their trip in terms of helping the full-time missionaries supported by the church congregation, so it would seem that their trip was real missions. Emphasizing the work of the missionaries gave theological and social validity to the trip, so it would not be confused with or criticized as Christian tourism. Their primary purpose of going was the mission or ministry, while educational benefits were stated as secondary. They emphasized the call of God on their lives to go on this trip. Instead of phrasing the trip as a personal decision they have made, they presented it as an opportunity to be taken (Howell, 2012).

In another study to establish a sociological understanding of what motivated short-term mission participants to go on trips, the interviewed participants went on the trip because of a calling from God or they felt led to go. Some described thoughts about the trip coming back to them and associated this with a calling from God (McDonald, 2015). The problem with solely relying on a call from God, is that there is no logical aspect of deciding to go on a trip, like weighing whether a short-term trip is good financial stewardship or if it is the best way to help others. These studies also showed that participants did not identify educational benefits as a motivation to go. They did not imply that going on a trip would help them learn from people and Christians living in a different culture and country.

Traveling, Having Fun, and Helping Others

Many participants feel motivated to go on short-term mission trips as a way to have fun, experience adventure and help others (Allen, 2016). When Howell asked one student about her motivations for wanting to go on the trip, she replied, “I’m excited to just help people. I don’t know so much about missions, you know, but we’ll be working with the missionaries doing real missions work, like sharing Christ and, you know, the Gospel.” When he asked, “Are there any other reasons you want to go?” she continued,

Well...I want to see what it’s like. I’ve never been to the D.R., so I just want to see what it’s like and stuff. But that’s not really why I should go, just to see, right? I mean it’s really about missions, and I think it’ll be, I guess, fun or good. Yeah...it’s like a chance to do missions. (Howell, 2012, p. 208-209)

This student’s statements showed that while she wanted to see what the Dominican Republic was like and perhaps learn about the country and culture, she felt like that was not a correct reason for wanting to go. Sean, a teen participant, described his reason for going as a way to see the world and helping it at the same time. Another teen, Sal, talked about being able to help others and that it was a good way to spend summer vacation (McDonald, 2015, p. 34-35). These students’ responses reflect the messaging promoted by churches and mission organizations that short-term mission trips are for the purpose of experiencing adventure and helping others. Again, there was no mention of benefitting from spending time with Christians in other cultures.

Creating Interest in Full-Time Missions

Another purpose many churches and mission organizations give for going on short-term mission trips is that they serve as a look into real missionary life and inspire many young people to become full-time missionaries. This reason for short-term missions, however, was not expressed in any of the interviews conducted in both Howell and McDonald's studies. Kurt Ver Beek, assistant professor of sociology at Calvin College with over 20 years of experience in Honduras, researched the long-term impact these trips have on the team members. He studied beyond peoples' initial declarations of wanting to go into long-term service immediately after a short-term mission trip and looked at their actual behaviors long after the trip. Data indicated there is not a significant increase in financial giving to long-term missions and it was hard to support claims that the number of long-term missionaries has increased because of short-term mission participants. In fact, the number of long-term missionaries around the world remains fairly steady despite the growing popularity of short-term missions (Ver Beek, 2006).

Objections to Short-Term Mission Trips

The primary reason churches and missions organizations promote false messages is because their short-term mission trips are inappropriately structured. Common messaging reflects a trip that is planned around tourism, experiencing adventure, completing projects and helping others. This structure can be harmful and does not equally benefit both the participant and the community being visited. It is the responsibility of churches and mission organizations to not only appropriately market these trips, but to structure them in a way that they benefit both the participant and community being visited.

Unwanted and Unneeded Teams

It is important that the host organization or church in the country a short-term mission trip team is traveling to requests a team, and more importantly the community members, have requested a team to improve their work and ministry. This is to avoid North American churches imposing on international churches or ministries and making them feel obligated to host and accommodate short-term mission teams. “It is important not to trample the poor just so your church can get more engaged in ministry” (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012, p. 163).

Short-term missions requires time for the hosts to coordinate and plan to accommodate visiting teams. Van Engen wrote about a Nicaraguan doctor she knew who ran a health clinic for poor families. He could barely keep up with his work training community workers to promote better health and treating serious illnesses. But despite this, he spent three months each year planning and preparing for American medical teams. He admitted that although the teams accomplished little because visiting doctors mostly handed out aspirin for headaches and back pain, he did not complain because the U.S. organization that sent the teams also funded his clinic (Van Engen, 2000). It is vital that short-term mission teams do not create additional work for hosts who could spend their time and energy effecting real change in their community.

Uneducated Participants

Another problem with short-term missions is the lack of emphasis on learning about the country and culture before going on the trip. Many short-term mission participants go on trips unknowledgeable about the people and place they are visiting. Traveling with this naiveté, participants have a greater chance offending the people they

are visiting and they may leave with a shallow learning experience. It seems silly to travel thousands of miles away from home with the intent of forming relationships and sharing one's faith with people that one does not know anything about. In McDonald's study, when asked to elaborate on the particular places they were going, all ten participants were unable to talk about the history of the country and how it affected the country's people in modern times. They were unknowledgeable about the historical and social context of the travel destination. They could see the lack of healthcare and the poverty, but they did not understand why it existed.

The participants described the people they saw as less fortunate. One participant stated that traveling would help her be more appreciative of what she had because other countries were not as fortunate. While they recognized the trip would benefit them, all ten participants saw it as a form of self-sacrifice, specifically physical labor and the sacrifice of time, money, and energy. They desired to become more grateful for their own lives without attempting to more deeply understand global inequality and the causes of poverty. McDonald noted that the participants expressed a desire to help others in the countries they were visiting, but they were unaware of the actual realities of the people (McDonald, 2015).

Pre-trip learning should be a requirement, not a suggestion (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). It is important to spend as much time studying the history, economics, politics and religious context of a community as is spent on preparation activities, like team bonding activities (Howell, 2012). Beneficial preparation might include reading material from the native people, watching a documentary on a similar village, understanding the financial

and political situations of the community and participants recognizing their own cultural place and stereotypes (Root, 2008).

Mixing Missions and Tourism

It is common for short-term mission trips to incorporate some sort of tourism, such as sightseeing, staying at upscale hotels, shopping for souvenirs and dining at expensive restaurants, which are typically activities that local people would not partake in because of their high expense (West, 2011). Howell described the tension between tourism and mission on the trip he participated in for his study. The team spent part of the two-week trip going on a hike to local waterfalls, white water rafting and going to the beach. They also spent time shopping for gifts and souvenirs to commemorate the trip. There was tension evident as some students were unsure how to process or understand the conflicting purposes of helping and relating to those who live in poverty and tourism. After returning from the trip, the narrative given by the students emphasized the work they did for the community, sacrifice and spiritual growth, while downplaying the tourist activities of the trip (Howell, 2012).

Trips should not be focused around tourism or the fun and adventure of traveling to another country. There is nothing wrong with these activities, but “don’t label vacations as ‘missions’ nor dare ask people to fund them with their tithes and offerings. Doing so is an outrageous insult to the thousands of indigenous and expatriate brothers and sisters who sacrifice in mighty ways in ministry and to the poor themselves” (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012, p. 164). Since the purpose of short-term missions should be about learning how people in other countries live, it is a contradiction to spend time with people in poverty one day and then live as an extravagant tourist the next. It is equally

inappropriate and dishonest to fundraise for a trip, telling people that one will be serving and helping people, when the money is actually being spent for tourism.

Activity-Based Trips

There are many differences among cultures that have affected how North American Christians structure their short-term mission trips. This is partly due to common misunderstandings among cultures about poverty. Many short-term mission teams go into poor communities with the view of poverty as deficit, meaning they believe that people are poor because they lack something, whether that something is material resources, knowledge or even spirituality. This perspective of poverty leads to poverty-alleviation strategies where the non-poor (short-term mission participants) are giving to the poor because they have something that the poor do not. This is a core problem with trips that are typically one to two weeks long, because the giving, doing, or the ministering needs to be completed within that time frame. North Americans want to use the time of their trip wisely, completing projects, evangelizing to as many as possible and performing health checkups for the multitudes (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). Miriam Adeney, anthropologist, missiologist, and professor at Seattle Pacific University wrote

By definition, short-term missions have only a short time in which to “show a profit,” to achieve pre-defined goals. This can accentuate our American idols of speed, quantification, compartmentalization, money, achievement, and success. Projects become more than people. The wells dug. Fifty people converted. Got to give church back home a good report. Got to prove the time and expense was well worth it. (Adeney, 2000, p.1)

This focus on completing projects and effecting immediate change derives from contrasting views of time between cultures. A monochronic view is where time is perceived as valuable and a limited resource (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). It is a precious asset that is not to be wasted, and there is special importance placed on schedules and deadlines (Lederleitner, 2010). Examples of cultures who hold this view are the United States and the United Kingdom (2012). A polychronic view is where time is perceived as an unlimited resource, and there is always more time and people are never too busy. Appointments are not taken seriously and time is rarely seen as wasted, and these cultures heavily emphasize people and relationship (2010). Many places in Latin America and Africa hold this view of time (2012).

Because North America has an extreme culture that is monochronic, many short-term mission trips are activity-based and rely on a strict schedule of work projects and moving from one activity to another. While emphasizing productivity, results and final products is seen as positive to North Americans, communities being visited most-likely do not hold the same perspective. Since countries that are the most popular short-term mission destinations often have polychronic cultures, they have a greater emphasis on people and relationships. This supports that the way most current short-term mission trips are structured is not what is most appropriate for these different communities and cultures. When churches and short-term mission organizations advertise using messaging that emphasizes service and accomplishing work projects, they are appealing to the values that people in monochronic cultures view as important, instead of focusing on the values that the people being visited most likely view as important.

Financial Aspects

One of the biggest criticisms of short-term missions is that it is poor stewardship of financial resources. One can compare the costs of going on a short-term trip to the needs of nationals, supporting long-term missionaries and even the needs in communities in North America (Raines, 2008). The same amount of money spent for a team going on a one- to two- week experience would be enough to support more than a dozen indigenous workers for an entire year, who could do the work far more effectively than the short-term team. Corbett and Fikkert (2012) used the example of a highly respected Christian relief organization who employed people in the community to work with their holistic development team for \$1,500 to \$5,000 a year. This is compared to the \$20,000 to \$40,000 spent for 10-20 short-term mission members to be in the community for one to two weeks.

Kurt Ver Beek (2006), professor of sociology at Calvin College, surveyed 162 short-term mission participants who traveled to Honduras to help build homes after Hurricane Mitch devastated the country in 1998. The study compared the response of 30 Honduran families who had houses built for them by these short-term mission teams versus the families whose homes were built by local Honduran Christian organizations. They families seemed not to care which group built their house, even though the short-term mission team spent on average over \$30,000 to build a home while the local Honduran organization could do the same for \$2,000. Most host organizations would rather have the sending church or mission organization send them the dollar amount instead of a team. This is not because fellowship and cultural exchange is not appreciated,

but there are usually more pressing matters for the long-term well-being of the community.

Corbett and Fikkert (2012) said members should be required to pay for a portion of their trip because they are more likely to value it when they have to make a personal sacrifice to go. Teams should also consider donating as much money to the organization or ministry they are working with as they are spending on themselves. Teams need to seriously consider spending the same, if not greater, amount of money on the projects, organization or church they are visiting. If Christians going on short-term mission trips genuinely care about helping the poor develop and seeing their lives transform, they should invest in people and organizations working on long-term development (Van Engen, 2000).

Recommendations for Action

The consensus among researchers of this topic is that short-term missions will not go away, and most agree that it should not (Howell, 2012). Because harm has and can be done to communities hosting these short-term mission teams, churches and mission organizations need to restructure their trips to equally benefit the participants and the communities being visited. They then need to change their promotional messaging to attract the right participants and offer them appropriate purposes for going on short-term trips.

Proposed Changes for Short-Term Mission Trips

Many critics of current short-term missions believe that the trips need to be about *being* and *learning*, not just *doing*. Team members should spend time talking and interacting with local believers and community members, asking them to share how God

is working in their lives and their communities (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). In order to avoid the impression that the team is there only to help the less fortunate, it is important for the team to have an attitude of learning and not go expecting to be able to give something. Because many trips are based on teams traveling to offer some sort of help, labor or aid, this reinforces the poverty as deficit view and implies that the community being visited is incomplete and lacking. Sometimes the best outcome of these trips can be learning about their culture and faith rather than accomplishing tasks.

A challenging obstacle to changing short-term missions is the power imbalance it creates between the wealthy and the poor. Blumhofer and Crouch interviewed several African church leaders when they formed their short-term missions planning and training curriculum. Dr. David Zac Niringiye, assistant bishop of the Kampala Diocese of the Anglican Church in Uganda, asked for these trips to be reoriented around listening, not projects or activities. When asked how short-term mission travelers could best engage Ugandan Christians, he answered,

It is very simple. Come and be with us, with no agenda other than to be with us. One friend of mine by the name of Mark, a pastor of a large church, amazed me when he came to visit. He came for three weeks and he said, ‘All I want is to come and be with you.’ At first, I didn’t believe him...He was not unaware of his power, as a *mzungu* [foreigner, and more specifically, white person], and that people would think he had a lot of money. He asked me, ‘What should I say? What would be appropriate?’

“Just bring greetings,” I said. (Blumhofer & Crouch, 2008, p. 88)

A number of Latin American pastors, theologians and church leaders wrote about their experiences receiving and sending teams. They collectively encouraged the continuation of short term missions, but called for greater partnership and collaboration. Paraguayan seminary professor and pastor Martin Eitzen said,

On the basis of relationship, we, as Latin American Christians, would like [short-term missions] groups to keep coming. Not to teach us how to evangelize, or how to work correctly and efficiently in the church, but to live with us, get to know us, have fellowship together and this, living together, to learn from one another and teach one another. (Eitzen, 2007, p. 47)

This does not mean there is nothing that needs to be done in communities around the world, but instead of North American Christians going and seeking to solve problems that are really too complex to solve through short-term trips, they need to go to join together with people who are currently working for God's future and learn from them instead of assuming their labor and assistance is the answer these communities need (Root, 2008).

Root wrote,

The mission trip is the invitation to go and suffer with others, not to solve their problems. Instead of kids feeling empowered because they have done something...they should come home perplexed, recognizing how knotted the world is, and how our own advantage as tourists is borne on the backs of vagabonds. They should come home having sought to understand another as near to God, and therefore to see their own lives and recognize their own connection and disconnection from others who are forced to live as vagabonds. (Root, 2008, p. 318)

Lederleitner wrote, “What often occurs in cross-cultural partnership is that the person coming from the more affluent or developed country assumes he or she knows what is best” (p. 79). Lasting transformation for both travelers and the communities will take place when the control and itinerary are in the hands of the local Christian leadership and not under control of the North American Christians (Howell, 2012).

Being Honest about Purpose

While it may be hard for Christians to face the truth, it is more important for North American sending churches to be honest about the purpose of the trip than to masquerade it as something it’s not. One reason short-term mission trip members used narrative that they were called and felt led to go on the trip may have been to avoid appearing that they selfishly decided to go on a trip for their own pleasure and satisfaction. If short-term missions is mostly for the benefit of the goer, it is necessary for North American churches and mission organizations to address this. This will help avoid mentalities that the participants’ purpose is to go to sacrifice, serve and accomplish. It can help avoid possible guilt for members when they return and upon reflection, realize they did not do much ministering and helping at all because they either were participating in tourist activities or were being blessed by the Christians they met.

Churches and mission organizations might consider calling short-term mission trips by another name, such as a ministry trip, vision trip or exposure trip (Greenfield, 2015). This is so participants will not go with the expectation of somehow being able to give something that the community lacks. Calling it one of these suggested alternatives creates more of a sense of equal exchange – the team can minister in some ways to the community and the local Christians can in turn minister to the team. While calling the trip

by another name does not necessarily change the trip itself, it allows the trip members to begin with a correct mentality that they are going to learn, not necessarily give. It avoids giving the impression that the trip members are going to offer something the local community cannot do on their own. Kenyan Pastor Oscar Muriu, at the missions conference Urbana, said,

We don't call them "short-term missions" any more. We call them short-term learning opportunities." The problem with calling it a mission is that it implies an agenda. There's something I need to come and do for you, or to you, to better your life. In reality, that doesn't happen in two weeks. Life is far too complex for that. (Blumhofer & Crouch, 2008, p. 102).

How the Message Should Change

Along with structural changes to short-term mission trips, which primarily should be that trips become more about *being* with the people teams are visiting and learning from them, the promotional messaging churches and mission organizations use needs to change in order to show potential participants more appropriate purposes for going on these trips. First, the messaging needs to change to show the importance of being educated about the place the team is visiting. If church leadership and mission organizations do not communicate this, many participants will not understand the importance of it and how it will help them understand the place they travel to and the people they will meet. Second, tourism and the appeal of adventure must not be central to the message. Tourism activities defeat the purpose of understanding and trying to relate to how people in other cultures realistically live. Since the purpose of short term trips should be learning how people in other cultures live and do ministry, it is inappropriate

and insensitive for teams to enjoy extravagant activities that the local people would never be able to afford or do themselves. If potential participants are not attracted to the idea of a trip that does not involve these luxuries, perhaps a vacation would be a better route for them to experience another country. Lastly, the most important message that needs to change is what the purpose of short-term trips is. Churches and mission organizations need to stop promoting these trips as opportunities for participants to offer their help to those less fortunate, which objectifies the poor as a problem that needs to be fixed. Messaging needs to be primarily about being with and learning from the Christians and other local people they are visiting. Through the promotional messages, participants must understand that they are going not to sacrifice, serve or give something of themselves, but they are going to gain perspective from and learn from others.

Reflections

For both the participants and the communities being visited, the following are some spiritual attitudes surrounding short-term missions that should be deeply reconsidered. North American Christians need to abandon the *we will just go and leave the results up to God* attitude. Many Christians use this sort of theology to justify spending thousands of dollars traveling across the world in hopes their ten-minute encounter with an international stranger will lead them to Christ or instill some sort of long-term change. While it is not man's duty or place to try and calculate spiritual outcomes of different situations, one cannot abandon critical thinking and wisdom when it comes to stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to him.

Many Christians are drawn to these trips because of the mountaintop spiritual feelings during and after, a promise often seen in the messaging used to advertise short-

term missions. It is concerning that North American Christians rely on these trips to provide them with the deepest, most spiritual experiences of their lives. This leads to a more glaring question of why it takes traveling across the world and spending thousands of dollars for North American Christians to grow in their faith and see God at work in their lives and in the world. Spiritual growth and transformation are abstract and hard to measure outcomes, so it is hard to justify that these trips are worth the personal change when they are not equally benefitting the communities being visited.

Christians who go on these trips have either decided that the potential value outweighs the potential harm, or they are unaware and uninformed about the possible damage they can create. Fikkert wrote,

While higher impact strategies may provide less satisfaction than [short-term missions] for the giver in terms of “personal involvement or connection,” isn’t it a great modeling of the gospel to die to self so that others might benefit? Yes, this goes against the current cultural demand to touch, taste, and experience for myself. But the gospel has always called for challenging societal norms if they hinder the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. It is not about us. It is about Him! (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012, p. 162).

North American Christians need to more deeply consider whether their act of traveling around the world on short-term mission trips is an effective and wise use of their resources. They need to appreciate that Christians in countries around the world are ministering and evangelizing in their own nations and communities. God has blessed these workers with incredible talents and a strong passion for reaching their own people for Christ. Because of their understanding of local cultures and languages, along with the

fact they are living there long-term, make them far more effective in *doing missions* than any outsider ever could, and they do this work for far less salaries than North Americans could live on (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). While the alternative solution to missions of supporting long-term missionaries and local Christian workers may not be as personally satisfying, it is a significant thought for potential short-term mission participants to consider.

There is an impressive amount of research and thinking available on short-term missions for those who seek it out. Howell stated, “While much of this research remains unread by many who would benefit from its findings---as research so often does---the fact that it exists and that more is being produced is a reason to be hopeful” (Howell, 2012, p. 227). This research, however, is useless if those who could benefit from it do not read it (Howell, 2012). If after thought and consideration participants still believe they should go on a trip, it is important they seek a trip designed where they will not spend all their time serving and helping others, but one where they will have the opportunity to spend quality time with the people they are visiting.

The effectiveness of the efforts of the North American church deeply matters. The North American church needs to reconsider how their short-term mission trips are affecting the communities and the people they are visiting. Because many short-term trips are not based on a mentality of equality but often treat people as poor, unfortunate service projects, this is doing a disservice to both participants and the people on the receiving end. While it is uncomfortable for Christians to confront the flaws of trips that are so deeply ingrained in the North American church, with changes in the structure of short-term mission trips and changes in the promotional messaging that churches and mission

organizations use, both the participants and people on the receiving end of short-term missions can further benefit from this exchange.

References

- Adeney, M. (2000). When the elephant dances, the mouse may die. Retrieved from http://www.swazilife.org/uploads/1/6/6/8/16680214/adeney-the_dangers_of_short-term_missions.pdf
- Allen, V. (2016, February 1). How Haiti changed them. Retrieved from <http://www.sdrock.com/stories/haiti2016/>
- Blumhofer, C., & Crouch, A. (2008). *Round trip missions*. Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International.
- Church of the Highlands. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.churchofthehighlands.com/missions/project/nepal-grants-mill-apr-19-may-2-2016>
- Corbett, S., & Fikkert, B. (2012). *When helping hurts: How to alleviate poverty without helping the poor...and yourself*. Chicago, IL: Moody.
- Dominican Republic. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.adventures.org/trips/mission-trips.asp?locID=7&typeid=2&tripid=6084>
- Eitzen, M. H. (2007). Short-term missions: A Latin American perspective. *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2 (2).
- Experience Mission. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://experiencemission.org/display.asp?page=short-term-mission-trips>
- Greenfield, C. (2015). Stop calling it “short-term” missions. Retrieved from <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/worldview/stop-calling-it-short-term-missions>

Howell, B. M. (2012). *Short-term mission: An ethnography of Christian travel narrative and experience*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

Lakewood Church. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/pages/Ministry.aspx?eventId=630&mid=56>

Lederleitner, M. T. (2010). *Cross-cultural partnerships: navigating the complexities of money and mission*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.

McDonald, E. C. (2015). *Perceptions of the 'less fortunate': An exploratory study of short-term mission trips*. Retrieved from

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1733671331>

Probasco, L. (2013). *More good than harm: Moral action and evaluation in international religious volunteer tourism* (Order No. 3597541). Available from ProQuest

Dissertations & Theses Global. (1454306353). Retrieved from

<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1454306353?accountid=12085>

Raines, J. (2008). *An international perspective on short-term missions*. Retrieved from

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/304500688>

Root, A. (2008). The youth ministry mission trip as global tourism: Are we OK with this?

Retrieved from [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2008.00410.x/epdf?r3_referer=wol&tracking_action=preview_click&show_checkout=1&purchase_referrer=onlinelibrary.wiley.com&purchase_site_license=LICENSE_DENIED_NO_CUSTOMER)

[6385.2008.00410.x/epdf?r3_referer=wol&tracking_action=preview_click&show_checkout=1&purchase_referrer=onlinelibrary.wiley.com&purchase_site_license=](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2008.00410.x/epdf?r3_referer=wol&tracking_action=preview_click&show_checkout=1&purchase_referrer=onlinelibrary.wiley.com&purchase_site_license=LICENSE_DENIED_NO_CUSTOMER)

[LICENSE_DENIED_NO_CUSTOMER](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2008.00410.x/epdf?r3_referer=wol&tracking_action=preview_click&show_checkout=1&purchase_referrer=onlinelibrary.wiley.com&purchase_site_license=LICENSE_DENIED_NO_CUSTOMER)

Van Engen, J. (2000). Short term missions: Are they worth the cost? Retrieved from

<https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/s091/VanEngenShortTermMissionsarticle.pdf>

Ver Beek, K. (2006). The impact of short-term missions: A case study of house

construction in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch. *Missiology* 34 (4): 477-97.

West, C. C. (2011). *Volunteer tourism: Effective development strategy or feel-good*

travel? (Order No. MR79647). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses

Global. (881755756). Retrieved from

<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/881755756?accountid=12085>

Wuthnow, R. (2009). *Boundless faith: The global outreach of American churches.*

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.