

Long-term Impact through Short-term Missions: Key Components for Meaningful

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Missiologists and missions practitioners have long expressed mixed sentiments about the effectiveness of short-term mission trips. Do these trips have any meaningful long-term impact on either the participants or the host communities? Despite the temporary reduction of trips due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 1.5 to 2 million U.S. Christians will, as the pandemic subsides, likely resume their annual participation in short-term international mission work at a cost of about \$2 billion per year. Many missiologists believe that U.S. Christians who desire to help those living in extreme poverty should invest their resources in different ways (Ver Beek 2006, 478). Some would like for Christians to go back to the former days when denominations trained and funded all full-time, long-term missionaries. Such a nostalgic return to the former approach to missions is unlikely to happen. Nearly all U.S. Christian denominations are in serious numerical and financial decline, forcing these denominations to scale back significantly on their funding of long-term missionaries. Moreover, given the expenses involved in training, medical insurance, retirement, travel, and living expenses, funding long-term missionaries is not necessarily the most cost-effective way of doing international mission work.

Despite the lack of appealing alternatives, some missiologists still believe that short-term mission trips should cease. Nevertheless, the Pandora's box of short-term missions (STM) has been opened, and evidently no one has the capability of closing it no matter how much they dislike STM trips. Robert Schreiter labels this movement as the "Third Wave" of missions created by the ease of travel, the desire of Christians to be directly involved, and the availability of resources to make short-term missions happen (Schreiter 2015, 6-7). This Third Wave follows the two earlier waves of missions: the First Wave of missions (1450 to 1750) began with missionaries who accompanied European explorers to new lands, and the Second Wave of missions (1800 to 1914) arose with the founding of missionary societies and orders during the era of colonialism

(Schreiter 2015, 6). With the Third Wave of missions (1980s to the present), thousands of churches and mission-sending organizations have bypassed fading denominational missionary societies and boards to become directly involved in Christian mission work both locally and globally.

Given that short-term missions will likely remain a significant component of the Christian missions landscape, how can STM leaders avoid the potential pitfalls often associated with visiting short-term mission teams: cultural insensitivity, paternalism, misguided projects, dependency issues, cost inefficiency, and potentially temporary effects. Short-term missions come in a variety of shapes and sizes; some are much better than others. A significant number of churches and Christian organizations seek to be a witness to all the world by sending teams out to as many different countries and people groups as possible. Such an approach covers a large amount of territory but has little depth. Relationships without deep roots tend to fade quickly, resulting in largely short-term effects that can indeed be detrimental to the host communities. While these pitfalls may be the case for many short-term mission trips, others seem to have a much different result. Some trips have led to long-term transformation for those in the host community as well as the trip participants, resulting in deep, long-lasting, crosscultural partnerships.

The purpose here is to highlight three such partnerships developed through short-term missions that have resulted in long-term mutual transformation and development. In so doing, these partnerships offer insights about the ways that faith-based short-term missions can become a reflection of meaningful crosscultural Christian fellowship, true *koinonia*. They embody the “healthy reciprocal relationships” that DJ Schuetze and Phil Steiner claim are “critical to successful short-term mission trips” (Schuetze and Steiner 2018, 1). These faith-based international partnerships reflect a different approach that seeks to have groups focus on one specific community over an extended period of time. This process, sometimes called “twinning,” works to build relationships that will inform the types of mission objectives as well as the methods for fulfilling these objectives. Twinning relationships move beyond quick fixes to fixing the problems, from charity to development (Cosgrove 2008, 376). These faith-based partnerships may be formed between two congregations or between one congregation and a Christian non-profit organization or between two Christian non-profit organizations which are typically supported by one or more churches as well as individual Christians. Typically, one of these partners tends to have greater material wealth and technical expertise which they seek to share in dignifying and empowering ways with the other partner (Cosgrove 2008, 375). The three sets of twins for this study

are Christian non-profit partnerships with close connections to churches for their support and implementation of the objectives for development. The first is Adventures in Life Ministry and its partnership with Rancho Tunillo in Oaxaca, Mexico. The second partnership is Mission Waco Mission World and Rise and Stand Up with Power (Leve Kanpe Avek Pouvwa) in Ferrier, Haiti. The third is Straw to Bread and its partnership with Bethlehem Home in the Nyakach Plateau in rural Kenya.

The members in these three crosscultural partnerships recognize that poverty is larger and more pervasive than what is visible on the surface. The goer-guests recognize their own shortcomings and areas of impoverishment, seeking to become learners even as they are teachers in other areas. The Potter's House Association in Guatemala has developed a model for conceptualizing poverty that proves instructive for evaluating crosscultural partnerships. This Guatemalan ministry divides poverty into eight different spheres. Physical poverty manifests itself in easily visible ways and often serves as the starting point for mission objectives: meeting the basic needs of clean water, food, shelter, and medical care. Intellectual poverty refers to lack of access to formal education, but it also applies to the poverty of knowledge and understanding on the part of the goer-guests. Economic poverty highlights the need for sustainable businesses and a system that enables individuals and families to earn a living. Other spheres of impoverishment include spiritual poverty, a poverty of the will, poverty of a support network, poverty of affection, and poverty of civic involvement (Potter's House 2020). While the Potter's House Association in Guatemala is focusing on communities within its borders, these same forms of poverty manifest themselves in affluent countries as well though their presence often lies deeper below the surface.

Case Study 1: Adventures in Life Ministry

Adventures in Life Ministry (AIL) exists to make known the transforming power of the Gospel through short-term mission in Mexico. This is done through holistic ministry partnerships designed to reach the heart of Mexico. One of the key areas of its work is in Oaxaca. They partner with Rancho Tunillo, a small sustainable agricultural co-op that exists to provide help, support, and expertise in the primarily indigenous communities that surround Oaxaca City. This partnership formed in 2010. Dave Miller, the director of AIL, has worked hard to develop lasting relationships with those in Oaxaca, especially pastors. Through these deep, mutual friendships, he has learned about the greatest areas of need in the community and has learned from the local leadership what works best to minister to those in the region.

Over the years, they have worked together to provide clean water through filtration systems, basic medical care through local clinics, and needed supplies during emergency situations. They emphasize sustainability and training. Rancho Tunillo serves as a training center for subsistence farmers to come and “learn how to increase their crop yields, giving them better outcomes within the world they live” (Miller 2019). Together, they build and distribute micro-greenhouses to help local families have greater access to healthy food. During the pandemic, local church leaders like Pastor Chablé in Oaxaca partnered with AIL to distribute basic food supplies and chickens to help meet an immediate need for protein for isolated families, but they also distributed incubators to help these families create an ongoing source of food and income. Moreover these crosscultural partners provide vocational training in a variety of areas to assist the participants in finding gainful employment. Because of the well-established relationships, AIL was able to provide immediate care in December 2014 when riots broke out in the Oaxaca region, resulting in burned vehicles and businesses along with serious injuries to several AIL friends. Functioning as a caring extended family, supporters of AIL provided funds for medical care and replacement of vehicles and business losses. “Elisa was one of those injured by the rioters. After the violence and when she had healed, she was elected mayor of the Eloxochitlán. Now she's a member of the Oaxacan State Congress and a strong advocate for women's rights. She told me [Dave Miller] that AIL had been a huge part of the healing and recovery of her town” (Miller 2019). These partners are making plans for the future by developing a local presence of AIL through the establishment of Aventuras en la Vida Mexico with Asaf Vera, the son of a local pastor, serving as its Executive Director (Miller 2020).

Case Study 2: Mission Waco World Mission and Rise Up and Stand with Power

These are two Christian non-profit organizations supported primarily by churches and individuals. The two ministries have been in partnership for 30 years. Mission Waco Mission World's programs are built around three objectives: 1) empowering the poor and marginalized through relationship-based, holistic programs, 2) mobilizing middle-class Christians toward “hands-on” involvement, and 3) addressing systemic issues which disempower the poor (Dorrell 2019). Through its entire history, Mission Waco Mission World staff and volunteers have worked hard to balance “hands-on” relationships with the poor, local churches, and the community. The call to bring good news to the poor has been a driving force since its first day, and the desire to create a

biblical base for empowering compassion is still at its core. Rise and Stand Up with Power in Ferrier, Haiti, employs seven staff members. Janet Dorrell directs the international program for Mission Waco Mission World, and Dr. Nirla Nelson and Guy St. Vil oversee the work of Rise and Stand Up with Power. Their programs are focused on empowerment and addressing systemic issues that disempower the poor.

Through the 30 years of partnership, these two organizations have worked together to improve community and family well-being through several measures. They have drilled and maintained 400 water wells to provide clean, potable water. Together, they help provide education for 350 children. Each of these sponsored children receives individual medical care from Dr. Nirla Nelson, a Haitian medical doctor and daughter of the original leader of the Haitian parachurch organization. Together, they worked to meet another need in this Haitian community, the need for clean light. In November 2015, they supplied 750 solar-powered LED lights for a five-kilometer area around and in Ferrier. Dorrell explains, “Clean light is important because the oil lamps they were using were filling up their lungs with black carbon” (Dorrell 2016). The two organizations are also working to empower women through microcredit and job training. Eighty women have completed the program, and 140 others are now enrolled. One of the joint goals for these crosscultural partners is to remove the “invisibility cloak,” to let them know that, like Hagar in the wilderness, God sees them and cares for them (Dorrell 2017, cf. Gen. 16:13). Dorrell summarizes the transformation in this way:

The women who finish our training continue to meet weekly for encouragement in their lives. These women have dignity that changes the way they see themselves and the way their community sees them. They repair their own homes, put locks on their doors, pay their debts and put their own children in school. Their health has changed because they have capacity for point-of-use filters in their homes and can provide more meals per week for their families. They also have a leadership role in the community. Empowerment and dignity go together. We have seen that the women who are empowered do not stay in violent relationships. These women also speak up for one another. Their community of women relationships gives them courage and encouragement (Dorrell 2019).

Case Study 3: Straw to Bread and Bethlehem Home

Straw to Bread is a U.S.-based Christian non-profit organization whose goal is to collaborate with Bethlehem Home (BH), a Kenyan parachurch organization, located among the Luo people living on the Nyakach Plateau in rural Kenya. Habil Ogolla, the director of Bethlehem Home, and Lisa Baker, the director of Straw to Bread, are working together to improve health and education, economic empowerment, access to clean water, and food security for the Luo people. These two leaders have been collaborating for nearly 20 years, deriving much of their support through churches and individuals, both in the U.S. and in Kenya. Although they have communicated through various means, short-term mission trips have provided the greatest opportunities for Baker and her team members to develop relationships with the Luo people and experience personal transformation in the process (Straw to Bread 2020).

As with the other two partnerships mentioned above, the ministry in Kenya focuses on key areas for the health, development, and empowerment of the community. Straw to Bread and Bethlehem Home have collaborated to drill a centralized well that has the capacity to provide up to 500 gallons of fresh, pure water per hour. They also supplied hundreds of 250-liter rainwater-harvesting systems at the homes of the poorest residents of the Plateau, providing water during frequent droughts. Straw to Bread also works with Bethlehem Home to help the members of the community implement sustainable farming methods that maximize their crop yields, resulting in greater food security. Baker emphasizes the collaboration in this process: "At the center of our work is the philosophy that any successful farming project must be part of a continuing conversation with BH member farmers. These projects always occur as a partnership between Bethlehem Home and Straw to Bread" (Baker 2019). They have also prioritized education and medical care, resulting in a thriving school and hospital. Dr. Don Ogolla, son of the host partner earned his M.D. from the University of Nairobi and administers much of the medical care, gladly serving his home community even though he could earn more money in one of the larger cities. To work toward greater sustainability, the two ministries support microbusinesses, but they have also worked together to build a mortuary which will create a significant source of community income for years into the future (Baker 2020).

Discussion

All three of these partnerships have common traits that have resulted in life-giving transformation on the part of everyone involved. First, they have listened and learned

from one another, and the host partners have taken the lead in setting the agenda for priorities for *what* needs to be done in their communities and *how* these objectives should be accomplished. Unlike many short-term mission trip groups who insist on controlling the agenda for the trip, the goer-guests in these partnerships have listened to their host partners and followed their lead. For example, all three host partners identified access to clean water as a critical need for their communities; however, the means by which they accomplished this goal differed according to their contexts. What works best in one location does not necessarily work best in another. The U.S. partners provided technological expertise and material resources, but the host partners informed them what would work best in their specific communities. One size does not fit all. Water catchment containers and a centralized, deep well in one community, a network of water-filtration systems for another community, and a multitude of relatively shallow wells in the third community. Each host partner desired improvement in and greater access to education, but the type of education and method of providing that education varied from vocational training camps to sponsorships for students to attend local schools to the establishment of a new school with free education for orphans, supported in part by tuition-paying students whose parents desire to send their children to such a high quality school. Business development and training varied from culinary arts and photography to the making of straw baskets and sewing sanitation pads to building and running a mortuary.

The effectiveness of each endeavor has depended greatly on truly listening to the host partners and then working together with the resources and expertise of all parties involved. In so doing, these three U.S. partners appropriately addressed one of the most important concerns expressed by STM host partners: they desire to have significant oversight of the agenda for their community and local ministry (Horton et. al. 2013, 72-73). They desire for their voice to be heard in order to fully collaborate with each other in ministry and development. As one exasperated Haitian ministry leader bemoaned after the 2010 earthquake, “Oh, Americans—they would be almost perfect people except for one thing: if they would listen!” (Stafford 2010, 20). These three U.S. partners did listen and continue to listen to their international partners.

A second key component for the effectiveness of these partnerships is the investment of time for the purpose of building trusted relationships. The development within each of these communities has taken years of faithful commitment by each partner in the relationship. Miller has been working with his colleagues in Oaxaca for ten years, Baker has been involved with the work of Bethlehem Home in Kenya for 20 years, and Dorrell has been working in Haiti with her longtime friends for 30 years. From

the beginning, their intention has been long-term partnership. The short-term trips serve to facilitate long-term relationships, not simply a series of projects. As Eugene Cho wisely observed, “Without genuine relationships with the poor, we rob them of their dignity, and they become mere projects. And God didn't intend for anyone to become our projects” (quoted in Schuetze and Steiner 2018, 1).

Third, these partners have worked toward sustainability in terms of material resources. The U.S. partners are quite aware of the dangers of dependency. They have read about “toxic charity” (Lupton 2011). They have also read about “rich Christians in an age of hunger” and the biblical imperative for materially wealthy Christians to be generous towards those living in physical poverty (Sider 1997, 2015; Rowell 2006). They understand the necessity of “helping without hurting (Corbett and Fikkert 2009). Their goal is to share resources in such a way that their generosity does not debilitate but rather empowers those in the host community. Initial costs can be insurmountable for those living in financial poverty, but resourceful members of the host community are quite capable of maintaining and developing a wisely run endeavor whether that be water supply, a poultry enterprise, a sewing business, a greenhouse, a school, or even a mortuary. The end goal, however, is not complete independence. Both groups benefit from and desire to be in relationship with one another, leaning on the other as needed. In the words of Mark Elliott, “What is needed between crippling dependence and crippling independence is a biblically based mutual interdependence” (Elliott 2020, 85). These partnerships reflect the image of the body of Christ, one body with many different members. All members contribute according to their gifts, knowledge, skills, and abilities for the good of the entire body.

Fourth, they also work toward sustainability in terms of leadership. Adventures in Life has worked for years with Pastor Chablé and Pastor Vera. Now a new generation is getting involved with the leadership responsibilities. Pastor Vera's son, Asaf Vera, is leading the newly formed partner organization, *Adventuras en la Vida Mexico* (Miller 2020). Miller has recruited and trained others in the U.S. who will be able to keep the U.S. side of the ministry healthy and productive. The Haitian partner organization for Mission Waco Mission World has grown its leadership staff and now has its own Haitian medical doctor. Bethlehem Home now has its own Kenyan doctor and many other leadership staff. With support from their U.S. partners, members of the host communities have become medical doctors, pharmacists, teachers, as well as workers in other professions, using their education and training to build up their home communities.

Fifth, the members of the U.S. mission trip teams enter the host communities as learners in need of transformation. The team leaders shape the trips in ways that encourage their group members to be humble and seek to learn from those in the host community. Mission Waco Mission World, for example, refers to its trips as "exposure trips" to help their members understand from the beginning that they are not going to Haiti to rescue the Haitians. Rather, they are going to gain exposure to how God is already at work in Haiti and to learn how they can partner with the Haitians, serving in ways that are beneficial but also growing in their faith that leads to transformation in their lives. The team members realize that they, too, are broken in different ways, that they likewise experience certain forms of poverty. Our false sense of security in our relatively high material wealth can lead to spiritual poverty (cf. Luke 18:18-23). Many of these U.S. team members also suffer from isolation and loneliness because of the high level of individualism in the U.S. As we enlarge our understanding of poverty, we realize that we are all impoverished in one way or another. We need to learn from one another and lean on each other. As the percentage of Christians and the vitality of Christianity declines in Europe and North America, we should recognize that we have much to learn from Christians in the global South and East whose vitality and many examples of deep spiritual devotion have much to teach. This experience of "reverse missions" requires humility, but the lessons may invigorate our lukewarm faith (Burgess 2020, 249-253). My own study of students who participate in mission trips demonstrates that such participation has a tendency to lower student levels of ethnocentrism and materialism; moreover, these STM experiences often have a transformative influence on their lives and sense of vocational calling (Horton et. al. 2011, 58-62).

Sixth, both partners acknowledge and accept that they will make mistakes and experience failures, but they do not allow these failures to keep them from continuing to work together. Even with training, wisdom, collaboration, and hard work, problems arise from time to time. Team members occasionally say or do something culturally inappropriate, moral failures damage the community, government regulations cause delays and increased costs, droughts wipe out newly planted orchards, earthquakes and riots disrupt businesses, and pandemics bring a halt to planned visits. In short, life happens with all of its good and bad and disruptions. Commitment to the partnership, however, has kept each of these groups collaborating with their partners as they attempt to minister to one another and their respective communities.

Seventh, these groups understand the mixed cultural repercussions of past missionary interactions, but these partnerships do not become immobilized by past

mistakes. Growing concern for indigenous cultures have led some to accuse past missionaries of cultural imperialism. These critics believe that missionaries imported Western culture as part of the gospel while simultaneously stripping the indigenous culture away from those who converted to Christianity. Indeed, some missionaries were guilty of this, forcing converts to adopt Western clothing styles, music, and social etiquette. Some Christians have reacted to these past mistakes by discouraging mission work and any interference with those in other cultures. Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian Muslim who converted to Christianity and later became a professor of World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, referred to such a reaction as the “Western guilt complex about missions” (Sanneh 1987, 331). Sanneh warned Christians not to become immobilized by such guilt. Rather, they need to recognize that past missionaries also played an important role in preserving indigenous cultures and that they can continue to have a preserving cultural role today (Sanneh 1987, 333-34). The better response then is to learn from past mistakes and interact responsibly and appropriately with those of other cultures. Each of the U.S. partners in these case studies have worked diligently to respect and learn from the cultural values and customs of their host communities. They eat the local food, adapt to the local customs and etiquette, and grow in their appreciation of values that differ from their birth culture.

Conclusion

While some argue that short-term missions are ineffective with little positive lasting impact on the participants and negative or inefficient impact on the host community, these three examples of long-term mutual partnerships based on deep relationship provide evidence of a different narrative. The examination of these three partnerships—these three sets of twins—provides valuable lessons. Some key themes and values include the meaningfulness of long-term relationships along with the value associated with a holistic approach, sustainability, local empowerment, host-community input and leadership, mutual learning, reciprocity, involvement and interdependence of individuals, churches, and organizations. Long-term partnerships developed through short-term missions include one network of entities collaborating with another network of entities. It doesn't take a village; it takes two villages.

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