

Short-Term Missions:

Refractive Errors and the Hope of Proper Treatment

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Short -term missions and the behaviors of participants on short -term mission teams have been and continue to be the subject of scrutiny from many and varied perspectives. This paper represents a response to this scrutiny in the form of questions concerning the curricular clarity in the preparation of participants and the formative context of many who participate on short-term mission experiences. Some suggestions are offered in response to concerns about short -term missions that might provide a curricular framework to address some of the challenges identified in the critical analysis of short term missions and those who participate as members of teams sponsored by churches in the United States.

Have you ever seen anything like this?

It is summertime and you find yourself at the Anywhere in the USA International airport. You go to your assigned gate and sprawled on the floor and most of the seats are people who are wearing the same color t-shirts that proclaim they are taking Jesus somewhere. Who are these people?

Chances are they are people who love Jesus and want to express that love by taking him with them to "other people" in other lands they really do not know much about. They are more than likely members of a church comprised of people who are all like each other and who come from similar social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

They gather together regularly and from time to time there are missionaries who come to visit their church to tell about what God is doing in the world during the special mission emphasis weekend each year. Somewhere along the way, one of the members of the church senses that God just might have them go somewhere in the world. They become aware of places they can go and things that they can do and a leader emerges who makes some contacts and asks some questions and comes back to the group to invite others on what promises to be a life changing experience.

As they gather, questions emerge about what kind of work they will be doing, how hot it will be, if the water will be safe to drink, if they will be safe, and if there is any food to eat or should they bring their own? They remain in constant communication with a contact person on the "mission field" to which they will be taking Jesus. They gather all the answers to their questions and process the information together. Someone suggests it might be a good thing to pray and so they set aside special times to pray.

They wash cars together, sell cookies and some write letters to friends and family asking for support as they go to a land and people they do not know. At some point they receive information about the culture and customs of where they are going and they read this information with amusement and are amazed. They question why "those people" would do things "that way" and now are excited for the opportunity to perhaps teach people new and better ways to do things. First on the agenda is that God does not care what we look like on the outside. Since God looks on the heart (and it is so hot over there), shorts, really short shorts, can be worn when you work and when you worship anywhere in the world.

As time passes, there are those who cannot go but would like to help by giving things. So the team starts collecting stuff since some of the pictures they have seen of where

they are going make it clear that people not only need the Lord but also stuff and lots of it.

So now they are ready to go. They have prayed and packed and with passports clutched in their hands or worn around their necks, they are off to an unknown land and people to do things and bring stuff. Anyone within a hundred yards of them knows they are there since they are excited about going and that excitement translates into them living loud and large as they travel and play all sorts of card games.

So you ask where they are going and what they are doing and they proudly proclaim that they are "missionaries" and they rehearse in detail the events that have unfolded to bring them to this moment. The flight is uneventful, apart from the people popping up and down to take pictures of each other on the plane, and together they get through immigration and customs and are greeted by their hosts. One of the team members speaks loud enough for people to hear back home and asks if anyone here speaks English.

Tired, and a little hungry from the journey, another goes to a street vendor and pulls out a United States dollar bill and screams slowly: "Do you take real money?" Others gather around and wonder out loud what kind of food that is anyway and ask their hosts if people here really eat it while others comment on how dirty things are and break out the hand sanitizer. With all the bags full of candy and clothes in tow, the journey begins and for those of us who have been there, we know the rest of the story.

Why should we expect anything else? With the boom of short- term missions the world and mission fields have been opened to anyone and everyone with results that often are less than desirable. Father, forgive us, because at times we do not know what we are doing even though we are trying to do what we believe to be the right thing.

Much has been written about short- term mission participation and a cursory examination of the material indicates that there are multiple expectations placed on the experience and those who participate. In preparation for this paper, I was invited to consider David A. Livermore's book, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open* as one of the more responsible and scholarly treatises on short term missions. Concerning those who participate, Livermore writes:

"The biggest challenges lie in the communication, misunderstanding, personality conflict, poor leadership, and bad teamwork. All too often we try to respond to these challenges by attempting to change surface-level behaviors rather than getting at the assumptions and convictions behind our behaviors. We learn the dos and don'ts about how to act when we go somewhere, yet it seems to make little difference in how we actually interact cross-culturally. We come home with zealous descriptions of how we've changed, yet within a few weeks, our lives look pretty identical to how they looked before the trip." (2006:14)

Where are these people coming from?

For the sake of argument, what would happen if we accept Livermore's assessment of the challenges and use them as a framework to develop a curriculum to be used in the context of the Christian Education program of a church? The working assumption for this curricular call is that participants on short- term mission experiences for the most

part are coming to fields out of the context of a church, are traveling with those who come from churches, and are returning to these churches following their experiences.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to call for the local church to understand its existence and purpose in terms of *missio Dei* and to develop missionally focused materials to be used in the formation of followers of Christ. It is appropriate to paint with broad brush strokes the picture of many churches that send out short-term mission teams to gain an understanding of the essence of the challenges Livermore has articulated. What one thinks and understands, or does not care to think or understand, about the nature of God, the church and mission has a great influence on the way in which one interacts with the world around them.

George Hunsberger (1998) offers a cogent summary of thinking that has shaped such understanding within the church in the United States. Concerning the church, Hunsberger writes:

"This rethinking of the nature of God, church, and mission would appear to be a promising development if it were in fact evident in the operative style of today's churches or in the conceptions that govern them. But it is not. Indeed, the grammar commonly used to refer to or ask about the church still carries the heavy baggage of being a 'place where certain things happen'. We ask, for instance, 'Where do you go to church or where is your church.....' Indeed, even when not referring to a tangible building, we tend to relate church to a meeting or activity, a set of programs, or an organizational structure. Only with awkwardness would one talk about being 'part of a church'.

In North America, this 'place where' orientation manifests itself in a particular form. Both members and those outside the church expect the church to be a *vendor of religious services and goods*." (1998: pp 83-84)

If this is the case, then it helps us place the challenges facing short term missions within their own context: that of a local church. Could it be that those who participate on short-term mission experiences bring with them an understanding that these experiences are a spiritual/religious commodity to be consumed? Could what Livermore has documented be the fleshed out ways of life of those who come from a church where religious services are brokered? How does the local church frame these experiences for those who participate and where do they fit within the menu of services and programs offered by a local church?

Will you see what I see?

To a great extent what Livermore and others who have documented the behaviors of short-term mission teams are describing are issues of worldview. In the United States in general and the church in particular we have different ways of seeing. These differing ways of seeing lead to different ways of understanding and behaving within our own culture and this is exacerbated when involved in any kind of cross-cultural experience without an understanding of culture and the manner in which culture influences and shapes an understanding of the world in which we live.

So, it is not so much an issue of simply opening our eyes, it is more an issue of understanding how culture and worldviews influence the way we see and respond to what we see. The choices we make to behave and respond as a member of a short-term

mission team are made in terms of how we perceive what is around us. Walsh and Middleton's (1984) discussion of world views is informative at this point:

"World views are best understood as we see them incarnated, fleshed out in actual ways of life. They are not systems of thought, like theologies or philosophies. Rather worldviews are perceptual frameworks. They are ways of seeing. If we want to understand what people see, or how well people see, we need to watch how they walk. If they bump into certain objects or stumble over them, then we can assume that they are blind to them. Conversely, their eyes may not only see but dwell on certain other objects" (1984: 17)

If this is the case, then it will not be enough to simply have our eyes wide open: someone will need to offer a lens through which we view these experiences, where they fit into the mission of the church and the formation of followers of Christ, and how they are to be understood by those who receive teams. Without such a lens, each participant is left to construct their own meaning consistent with their understanding and worldview. Is it any wonder why Livermore and others have so much material to work with as they describe some of the dysfunctional qualities of short-term mission teams? When and where are we crafting lenses for these experiences?

To dream the impossible dream

I have a dream that one day we, the people of God, will no longer be squeezed into the mold of the world but instead, by the renewing of our minds, we will be rooted and established in the nature and character of Christ as reflected in a commitment to being missional people. Where ontological concerns take precedence and inform who we are and how we are to behave. That we will have a well articulated and developmentally appropriate program for spiritual formation that includes encounters with the truth of scripture revealing the essential nature of a missionary God and that followers of Christ in all stages of life will be invited to enter the world as participants in cross-cultural experiences designed to inculcate the understanding that God loves all peoples and we the people of God should too. That we will teach intercultural sensitivity as a means to embody that love, and the gathering of God's people will reflect the diversity of the society in which we live and no matter where we travel we will be recognized as those who love one another and all peoples.

Since this is still a dream, and the reality is that those who travel as members of short-term mission teams most likely come from churches where there is a pervasive commitment to consumerism and a desire to have personal needs and wants satisfied, we wake up to the reality that what we do with short term missions must be done with a lot more intentionality. It might be prudent to recognize that many who participate as members of short-term mission teams might come to these experiences as consumers of religious programs and services and as such may not understand themselves or the short-term mission experience in terms of being a body of people sent on a mission. It is precisely at this point that lack of clarity creates many of the less than desirable behaviors recorded in the literature critical of short-term teams. It is here that we can begin to address some of what Livermore characterizes as the "biggest challenges"

Recommendations

Having argued from a perspective that we must understand the participants and where they come from and to be sensitive to the fact that they come to short term mission experiences with their own lens of perception and understanding, it stands to reason that

the types of things we are looking for in short term missions, teams, and members of short term mission teams do not come naturally.

We are expecting too much of individuals to go to other lands and interact with other cultures without teaching and preparation. We should not expect people to know these things automatically. It is much more than just knowing how to be nice and it certainly goes beyond a list of things to do and not do. It demands that we be intentional in the preparation of individuals who will go to hopefully join hearts and hands with others in the context of a short term mission experience.

The intent of the following curricular considerations is to develop and provide materials to train and equip those who will work and serve in the context of a local church that sends short term mission teams. Critical to this training and equipping is a biblical, theological and missiological understanding of short term missions and other intercultural experiences. These are offered for consideration hoping against hope that someday, someone, somewhere will develop something like this so that we can begin to write about the great things that happened when we served with our eyes wide open having been provided appropriate lenses through which to view these experiences.

1. Gather feedback from fields who have and continue to host teams

It would be good if we were to gather from the various field areas feedback from those who over the years have received teams to gain insights into their perspectives on challenges they have encountered in dealing with teams. Much of the extant training material is based on a general understanding of culture. Would it not be possible for indigenous church leaders who receive teams to identify a field specific curricula for training those who travel? What a valuable tool to place in the hands of the church. This would also assist in reinforcing a field directed understanding of short term missions as well as identifying context specific challenges to address in the training and preparation of teams.

2. Train church leaders who send and travel with teams

There is a need to develop a curriculum for this training since most teams are left to themselves to choose or not to choose what to teach/learn. It is not enough to simply prepare a team isolated from the local church. We must prepare a local church to understand its role and relationship to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts so that teams are sent from churches who themselves understand that they are sent as well. An essential part of this curricular concern is the development of and commitment to a missional ecclesiology.

3. Articulate the purposes and roles of short-term teams

In continued conversation with those world areas who receive teams, articulate the purpose and role of short term teams on that field and communicate this with teams as part of their training. Short term teams need to understand their roles and responsibilities and the varied fields need to consider if and how short term teams fit into their long term strategies. This could help move the emphasis from the questions of "what will we do" to think more Christianly about "who will we be" as we interact with a culture other than our own and participate in the context of a field strategy that incorporates the use of short term teams.

4. Explore the concept of worldview as a vision for life

There is a need to address the concept of worldview in general and Christian worldview in particular as a vision for life. For the most part, those who participate in short term mission experiences do so out of a desire to do something for God. Given the number of years that short-term missions has been a part of the experiential program of local churches, coupled with the copious notes that have been taken on the broad range of behaviors exhibited by participants, is it not time to pause for a moment of critical reflection to determine what we are doing to offer teams a lens to use for these experiences and how they translate into being a follower of Christ? This is perhaps one of the most critical areas if we are to see any lasting fruits from the efforts of short-term mission experiences. Participants, who leave a consumer driven context, enter a different culture as a consumer and then return to a consumer driven context stand little to no chance of placing these experiences in their long term formative context. How are these experiences framed for participants? Are we providing tools to process, interpret and understand or are these simply part of the programmatic menu of a church to be experienced and consumed?

All of the criticism notwithstanding, short term mission teams have taken many people outside of the safe and comfortable confines of the local church and let them at least be aware that there is a world out there where God is alive and doing great things. The criticisms of the short term mission experiences and what they do and do not do indicate a need to come to an understanding of the purpose and role of short term missions.

What role do short term experiences play in the life of a follower? A local church? Long term mission strategy? It stands to reason that the way in which these and many other questions are answered will influence the manner in which teams engage. Educating and training leaders to ask these curricular questions is a must if leaders and participants are being asked to identify transferable concepts. It is only fair to the field and to the team that there is a mutually agreed upon understanding of these curricular questions so that we are not exploiting contexts as consumers with no appreciable long term results.

Livermore is correct in his assessment that the "...challenges for doing short-term missions well are huge." (2006:174) To ignore these challenges will be to miss the incredible opportunity to learn to see the world through the loving and caring eyes of Christ who was and continues to be the greatest short-term missionary we have or ever will know!

Bibliography

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