The Value of Short-term Missions in the Twenty-first Century

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Any mission you take on has little value unless you reach the goals of your mission. Christians through the ages have remembered the apostles’ reaction to Christ’s parting words to go into the entire world to make disciples, baptize and teach. The goal of this mission is what Paul calls the mystery hidden for ages: people united with Christ.

“The Journey of the Apostles” is the cover article for National Geographic’s March 2012 issue. These people from Galilee seem to have gone out as far as India, China, Persia and Egypt, according to Christian tradition. Southern France claims Mary Magdalene. We wonder and are grateful for their boldness and what drove them. But that was a long, long time ago, and they were the Twelve.

Must you and I, all these centuries later, disturb our lives by going—going out, going off, being sent, reporting back and burdening ourselves with responsibility for those outside of our “circle of influence”? We often say that our work is right here, and there is no lack of good works to be done by our church in our own city.

Looking closely, we see that the scriptures assume a traveling church, a traveling people of God. Since the call of Abraham, God has put his people in Egypt, Babylon, Rome and Alexandria. He has disciplined his people into being pilgrims. Paul is always sending someone to one of the churches to encourage the young Christians, take a gift, or see how they are doing.

The early church was networked; they assumed responsibility for churches other than their own. Epaphroditus, Timothy, Titus, Prisca and Aquila, Epaphras, Junias…Paul’s parting words in his letter to the Romans say there is a great mystery being revealed to the church “…so that all nations might believe and obey him.” The full number of the Gentiles must come in. Is it only Paul who was made an ambassador for Christ? Are the stories passed down to us in Acts only so that we have a history of how the church spread in the first century? Or is there a basic, underlying mission for all Christians for all time to be burdened with the care of other churches, other peoples, other neighborhoods? “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, each part has honor” (1 Cor 12.26).

The “work of the Lord” is our work in life—to love, to care, to show and tell the story of what God is doing in and with our world. Emmanuel—God with us, God in us, God come down. Renewal, transformation, rescue from slavery to self, becoming like God, taking part in the godly nature, attaining glory, immortality, a new body, a new name, a new heaven and a new earth. While it is happening in us, it is impossible to keep the process to ourselves. Sharing is part of our godly nature. Since we believe, we speak.

I write all of this because I sometimes prefer the words Paul wrote to the Thessalonians to live quiet lives and work with their hands. Let’s just stay put and mind our own business, can’t we? It’s enough work to take care of our own. Let the ministers, the present-day apostles, and the strange types who are missionaries do the going for the church. I did that as a student. Now it’s time to live a regular life and work in my own church and city.

Salt and light, however, spread. Salt makes things salty. Light enlightens darkness. Our nature in Christ is to spread out, effect change, suffer with, and tell others what has happened in our life. We are headed toward
an event that we will share with all the nations. Our view of life is a worldwide view. Staying put and caring only for my own is antithetical to my nature in Christ.

Seasons of going out can and should be a part of normal life for Christians. We call it short-term missions. Short-term mission work isn’t living elsewhere for the sake of Christ. That demands learning another language and culture, training and education in leadership, teaching, developing cross-cultural commutation skills, and much grounding in scripture in order to plant oneself with others into a foreign environment and learn how to reach those people.

Short-term missions is going out and loving others—loving them enough to care about their needs. Loving them enough to tell them about the true nature of life: an opportunity to be reconciled to God!

We go out as teens, as students, as special teams of older workers to do a task. Much of short-term missions today is showing the mercy and care of Christ to those in physical need. In times of war, disaster, famine, or untreated illness, God’s people are moved. So they leave and go out. The church sends out its people to respond to the critical needs of people in want or need.

But then sharing the light of the world with others and enlightening them about the true nature of life on this earth and the wonderful coming ages when Christians will reign with Christ is much harder to do. How do you segue into the reality of the spiritual world in the midst of a medical clinic or building shelter for the poor? It’s awkward and uncomfortable. So we say that we simply become Christ among the hurting. We respond with compassion as he did. Isn’t that somehow more authentic than preaching a message when no one is listening? The urgent needs cry out for assistance that leaves lasting help. The body of Christ going out for limited amounts of time needs to help people eat, have homes and drink clean water.

But until we create ways to connect our showing mercy with the reality of the poverty of the inner life of each person we help, our mission is transitory, limited, even shallow. Living water and the bread of life are more satisfying and life-giving than “real” bread. It’s a truth we find hard to actualize in our own well-cared-for lives, let alone in the lives of those in urgent need.

The goal is making disciples, fishing for men, and being the aroma of Christ or the aroma of death to others. Giving dignity and respect to each person we encounter, those of us who go out must demonstrate what we proclaim. But demonstration is not enough. Our faith centers on an event that people need to know about. The implications of that event need words. Our words must be prepared and practiced and trained into words that communicate resurrected life.

Only with practice in our training can we learn to talk about why we have come to do the work. Conversations about Jesus can come naturally if we practice by telling the story to our teammates first. Writing out why we believe in a risen Christ is a startling and satisfying experience and a start to putting into words what we believe.

So we refine and redefine our goals. We train and practice. At Let’s Start Talking (LST) we set some hurdles to jump:

- Each worker is trained to do the work.
- The work is defined and has been approved by the local Christians.
- Each worker has practiced the skills needed to do the work.
- The skills have been assessed by a leader or coach.
- The group knows the role of each person in the group.
- The team arrives prepared to work the plan.
- The work of the team is daily and time off is planned for certain days only.
- Sightseeing is not a part of the mission work nor the funding for the mission. All the questions concerning logistics have been answered before arrival, if and when possible.
- Starting the task of the team begins upon arrival.
- The team does not waste time or funds; they have tools for accounting for both.
- The receiving church, i.e., the church that invited and is welcoming the short-term team, has prepared for its coming.
• Their expectations have been explored and refined.
• Their participation has been defined.
• They have “buy in” to the work, tasks, or project.
• More importantly…

...What will we leave behind? What is the effect of our having been with them for a time? Is our care and concern helpful to them or helpful mostly to us? Do we return telling about what happened to them or do we talk about our own wonderful spiritual experience? Do our new friends know their heavenly Father? Do they know that are saved from a life of striving for things that will not last?

In working with a church abroad, are the local believers burdened by our presence or blessed? Did we receive their invitation to come and listen to their advice on how we could best help, or did we charge in uninvited using the “mission church” as a learning lab for our own church family or youth group? Is our doing good centered in a message that we communicate intentionally, thoughtfully, respectfully?

As a founder and director of the Let’s Start Talking Ministry, I ask myself those kinds of questions. What exactly are we about? Short-term missions must equip and send out trained, effective workers. And the work must be helpful to the people and the church abroad. “Are we of good use to you?” is a question we constantly ask the church leaders abroad. We must clarify just what it is that we can do to be of help and it must be something that enhances the work of the mission church abroad. Do they need our coming for the added manpower, example, encouragement or expertise? Or are we doing work they should and could be doing themselves?

Who should be a part of the short-term mission team is a critical question. I often hear that this or that person should go out because “it would be so good for them.” Church leaders in the United States have interviewed us with the underlying question being, “What’s in this for us?” And well-meaning friends often assure us that our ministry has been so good for our American church. What goals do we have in short-term missions? Are we saving people without hope or do we exist to build ourselves up? People going out must have a lot to give and expect to sacrifice personal needs and to defer to the needs of the work, the team and the local church.

A ministry like Let’s Start Talking or any ministry that sends out interns or short-term workers does not serve itself. It exists for others. Others out there, over there, many miles away. We talk to people in other countries in a way that is welcomed and warmly received. We go out trained and equipped to a place that asks for us and prepares for our coming. We partner with those churches to be effective in their neighborhood and in the host culture. We are only there a little while, so we explore with the local group of Christians how the reaching out, the helpfulness, and the talking about Jesus can continue after we are gone. If we are truly effective at what we do, we train the mission church to not need us anymore!

Going out needs to become part of our rhythm of living. Training from those who have gone before is essential. Going out with friends and family, reporting back and staying connected with our new friends abroad seem only natural. Children who go out early learn to believe their parents’ faith is authentic and learn to incorporate going out into their own developing worldview.

When we cannot go we send. Some go, some send, some equip, some go back to learn the language and live for an even longer period of time. Some hold us accountable for the funds, the time and the man-hours. Some dream up new ways of being effective. Some do the physical work while others verbally share the message. Sometimes we all switch roles.

But the goal is Christ in others and new creations in the people we regard with new eyes—those people out there, other from us, loved by God, loved by the body of Christ.

Short-term missions takes its place in today’s church as it has done from the beginning. Christians go out into the world. We don’t keep to ourselves. But any mission for any amount of time has no place unless the goals are achieved. We either communicate the reality of Christ’s birth, life, death, resurrection and second coming, or we fail. We either tell others what has happened to us in Christ or we quietly leave them to live a better life and then die without hope.
Those of us who lead in short-term mission ministry must constantly evaluate the work we do with and for the churches abroad. We define our goals and sharpen our effectiveness through training and preparedness by both the team that is going out and by the receiving church. Above all, we must renew our commitment to seeing that no one misses the grace of Christ as we serve, teach and encourage—fishing for men and women, making disciples, accepting with sensitivity our commission as ambassadors for Christ.

Our message is that God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Short-term workers can help people with their urgent needs and then talk with them or open the door for a conversation about their most basic need. With care and practice we can learn to communicate this message of reconciliation and restored relationship as we travel abroad for a few short weeks doing good, full of compassion, helping those in great need.

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