

Missionary Work Serves as a Wake-up Call for Some Americans

Are Westerners too dependent on the satisfaction of having done something for them?

A few years ago, I was in a church service where a team of energetic young adults was reporting on their short-term international mission trip. Like most such groups, this one had plenty of cross-cultural experiences to report.

“The food was so spicy,” one wide-eyed young woman said, drawing laughter from the congregation. “It was terribly hot and humid—we had such a hard time getting to sleep,” another team member said. Amid much hilarity, the team leader described their consternation when they arrived at a remote village only to discover that the Christians there were expecting them to lead a worship service—on the spot.

They had been stretched, they said, way beyond their “comfort zones.” They had also returned full of praise for God and love for one another and their new brothers and sisters. “We received so much more than we gave,” one team member said. They were all wonderful, true sentiments that I had heard dozens of times from returning short-term missionaries.

The only difference was that I was in Nairobi, Kenya, every member of the team had been born and raised in Africa, and they had just returned from India.

That morning I had to unlearn several of my ideas about global mission. That this short-term team even existed (as part of their church’s partnership with several churches in India) was dramatic evidence of the “multidirectional” nature of mission in the 21st century. The travelers’ testimonies reminded me

that North Americans are not the only ones making pilgrimages of mission around the world.

But the African students' report on the difficulties of serving cross-culturally also challenged a subtle assumption of mine: that crossing cultures was somehow uniquely difficult for Westerners. To be sure, these Africans had grown up in a society where tribal identities still shape daily life, and most of them spoke at least one language alongside English—so they were well ahead of most white American Christians in their cross-cultural awareness.

Also, they would have arrived in India with none of the assumed privilege (and potential resentment) that clings to many Western visitors to a former colonial outpost. Still, in many ways crossing borders was as unfamiliar and difficult for them as it was, and is, for me.

If you define “mission” as crossing cultural boundaries for the sake of the gospel, the global church is engaged in mission on a scale that would have been unimaginable to previous Christian generations. Ever since the journeys of Paul and his friends, missionaries have hitched rides on the infrastructures of commerce and military power. What is different today is the sheer scale and speed of human mobility.

Travel and telecommunications have become less expensive and more efficient by several orders of magnitude. Globalized economies reward and demand travel. Millions buy one-way tickets to new lands with hopes of better lives, but an increasingly affluent slice of the world's population can afford to travel round trip. Likewise, Christian mission's center of gravity is shifting from the few who set off for a far country with no plans to return, to the many whose return tickets are tucked safely inside their knapsacks.

Is this round-trip mobility a good thing for the advance of

the gospel? Perhaps. The African team came back with stories of new converts and strengthened believers in India, as well as the increased confidence that comes from taking real risks for faith. Many American teams can tell similar stories.

On the other hand, you don't have to listen long before you hear embarrassing tales of cultural insensitivity and mismatched expectations. Americans in particular tend to be activists, wanting to see concrete outcomes—which can lead to make-work projects, sometimes with comic results. (As Nairobi pastor Oscar Muriu told me in an interview for Leadership, “After you leave, we repaint many of the walls that you painted!”)

Many cultures value preserving warm relationships more than they value the kind of truth telling that may lead to conflict; thus, short-term teams may come and go without ever realizing they have disappointed the receiving partners who seemed so welcoming.

Return tickets can lead to attenuated relationships. A friend's church recently sent a second short-term team to serve alongside Christians in a small, materially poor town in Central America they had visited the previous summer. They were overwhelmed, and taken aback, when their hosts tearfully told them on the last night of their visit, “We have had American Christians visit us before. But none of them ever returned. We thought that God had forgotten us.”

Perhaps this is one thing we need to learn, and unlearn: Even the shortest cross-cultural mission trip is fraught with opportunities for God to make himself known—and with the real potential that we will unwittingly misrepresent him. The shorter the journey, in some ways, the greater the stakes, since we will all too easily ignore both the blessings and the blunders.

Nairobi wasn't the first place I heard one of the most well-

worn clichés of short-term mission: “We went expecting to give”—to lead a Vacation Bible School, do door-to-door evangelism, or build a school—but we received so much more than we gave.” This is a truism whenever we visit another culture for a short time—we will usually be the guests, served with a graciousness we likely will not fully appreciate. Anyone who has been on the receiving end of a short-term group knows just how much work it takes to host well.

Yet we seem surprised every time, because the whole apparatus of preparation for short-term trips assumes that the reason Americans invest their time and treasure is to do something for others—to check off a list of activities that will supposedly help advance the gospel. In fact, it is the rare short-term team (with the notable, partial exception of medical and dental missions) that brings such unique skills and cross-cultural sensitivity that they can make a net contribution in their brief visit. Our counterparts in the developing world are more resourceful than we imagine—and we need them at least as much as they need us.

How different would our short-term trips be if the typical fundraising pitch went something like this: “Dear members of Bethel Community Church: This summer, eight of us will be traveling to spend time with our fellow Christians in _____, and to serve their neighbors who are not Christians through the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. Our purpose in going is to learn and to bring what we have learned back to this church. Frankly, we will benefit from this trip in more ways than will our gracious and generous hosts. Please support us in this endeavor to become the church God wants us to be.”

Would we give to that kind of mission? Would we go the next logical step and welcome Christians from that far-off community into our world, inviting them to send teams of their own to help us serve our neighbors? Or are we too dependent on the satisfaction of having *done something for them over there*?

Would it be too much of a blow to our pride to reexamine the assumptions built into these words?

Happily, more and more churches are changing the meaning of round-trip missions. In the course of researching this year's CVP emphasis on trends in global mission, filmmaker Nate Clarke and I discovered a number of churches pioneering a very different approach to missions. They were planning trips carefully to build long-term partnerships rather than just to provide one-off experiences.

They were sending both junior high students and senior pastors. They were making it possible for their less affluent partners to make trips of their own to the United States, so that mission was no longer unidirectional but truly "round trip." The result in each case was more lasting results in both locations than short-term missions can usually hope for. Our documentary film and small group curriculum, *Round Trip*, will be released next fall, and we hope it will start many conversations about how to make short-term missions more fruitful for senders and receivers alike.

This year's CVP articles have responded to the question, "What must we learn, and unlearn, to be agents of God's mission in the world?" It's not just full-time missionaries who are becoming learners and unlearners. The more we learn to make short-term missions two-way experiences, the more we all will learn about God's work in the world—and in us.