

# Short-Term Missions: A Latin American Perspective

Martín Hartwig Eitzen

## Introduction

Writing about short-term missions (STM) from a Latin American perspective presents two problems. The first has to do with the term as such. While in the northern hemisphere the term *short-term missions* is widely used and understood, the same cannot be said for the southern hemisphere. The equivalent term would be “misiones de corto plazo,” but it is not widespread in the Latin American Christian world. The second problem has to do with the great diversity of cultures, mission organizations, and foreign and national churches with their own mission experiences.

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It would be presumptuous to purport to represent all these experiences in this paper. Therefore I present only *one* Latin American perspective, which in this case represents the points of view of theology students and staff at the Evangelical University of Paraguay.

### A History of Missions from the Other Side

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First of all, we need to recognize that our perspective on missions in general is subject to historical conditioning. Evangelicals in both North and South America have an idea of what a missionary is. However, while children in Sunday school in the north learn that a missionary is a person from their own country and culture, who speaks their language and may even be a member of their own church, children in the south learn in their classes that a missionary is a person who goes from a northern country to a third world country —possibly the country these children live in—to take the gospel to the

poor and ignorant who are slaves under Satan's yoke until the missionary appears. The missionary does not share their physical traits, does not belong to their culture or country, does not speak their language well, does not live in the same kind of house as they do, and it is never clear what work the missionary actually does. In short, the missionary always comes from somewhere else.

Although the Congreso Misionero Iberoamericano (Ibero-American Missionary Congress, COMIBAM) declared nearly twenty years ago that Latin America was no longer a continent that only received missionaries but was becoming

a continent that would send missionaries to other countries and continents (Pate 1990, 42), this change in mentality has not reached most churches. When we speak of missions and missionaries, most Latin American believers do not feel it has anything to do with them. That is not in any way to diminish the worthy efforts in the field of international and intercontinental mission that Latin Americans have carried out in the last two decades. However, thus far, we have no stories of a Latin American William Carey, Hudson Taylor, or David Livingstone. A separate investigation should reveal whether this lack of mission success stories is due to the lack of such experiences or to the lack of information about and dissemination of such stories.

This point needs to be made because the observations on STM that follow are partially based on a survey carried out among theology students and lecturers,<sup>1</sup> for whom a missionary is a foreigner.

### **From the Known to the Unknown**

The abovementioned survey gives the following definition of STM:

“Short Term Missions” is generally used of the visit of a group of Christians from a different country or culture to existing churches or mission fields. The group carries out creative activities that aim to evangelize more of the population and to strengthen the local church or Christian

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was of 60 students and teaching staff of the Department of Theology of the Evangelical University of Paraguay. It was carried out in July 2006, and the aim was to learn their opinions of STM. My observations are based on the 45 replies received and are merely a sample of a relatively homogenous group. I do not as yet have a quantitative study that would offer more reliable results on what other Paraguayan Christians think of STM.

community These missionary visits are generally not more than three weeks long, although other missionary activities that last up to six months can also be considered STM

Over half of those surveyed stated that they did not know what STM meant before reading the definition. Relatively few people in Latin America have access to university education. This reality is also reflected in the evangelical churches, where few people (approximately 0.1% of the evangelical population in Paraguay) have access to tertiary theological studies (U.E.P. 2006). If half of these elite do not know what STM are, we can conclude that this mission method is not yet well known among Paraguayan Christians.



In general, STM trips are two- to three-week ventures made by a group of Christians from one country or culture to another like this group which traveled from Illinois to Peru to carry out evangelism and service projects

When the word “missionaries” is used in Latin America, Christians think of career missionaries who come to stay for ten, twenty, or thirty years, or even their whole lives.

### **My Own Experiences and Those of Others**

Having said that the concept of STM is not widely known among Paraguayan Christians, it is interesting to note that a significant proportion (44%) say that they have received mission groups on an STM activity in their church. The case in Paraguay is that the North American organization Disciple Making International (DMI) has been organizing STM activities for about fifteen years. These visits started with groups of people from North America who came to help local churches evangelize all the families in their neighborhood. The second phase consisted of the national churches doing the same. A group of Christians from one church would go to another church to help in the evangelistic task. The program worked well as long as all the expenses of travel, accommodation, and materials were covered by DMI. When DMI tried to withdraw and leave the initiative in the hands of the Paraguayan churches, the missionary spark was extinguished due to the simple fact that the financial cost of this kind of evangelism is very high. The third phase consisted in DMI inviting local “missionaries” to an STM in another country. Fares and accommodation were covered entirely by DMI. This way, Paraguayan Christians had the chance to be missionaries for a few weeks in Canada, Russia, India, Angola, Congo, Mozambique, Panama, Nicaragua, Chile, Peru, and Brazil. DMI currently continues to work on a smaller scale with theology students. This may account for the relatively large percentage of those surveyed who have had experience of STM; over half (53%) state that they have participated in an STM.

## Real and Imaginary Results

One of the criticisms leveled at the STM movement in its countries of origin is that the results of the missionary visits, which are often presented with great fanfare, are not in fact as positive for the destination country and/or the national

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church that receives the external aid (Penner 2002). In our survey, people were asked to mark, from a list of ten options, all those that they felt applied to the experiences they had had with STM. The results show that Paraguay has had good experiences with foreign STM visits and consequently has a positive image of said visits. 67% of those surveyed state that STM brings some benefit to the national church that they aim to help, without specifying any benefit in particular. 63% state that STM achieves a high number of converts. It must be mentioned that most of those who marked this option would have been thinking of the STM procedure used by DMI, which is

primarily evangelistic. The large number of converts achieved on STM is also partly due to the Latin American cultural courtesy that does not allow them to reject the invitation to accept Christ made by a foreign missionary. In my personal experience, I recall an STM in a church in Asunción where, in less than one week, more than eighty people prayed to give their lives to the Lord. After the joy and celebration of the great work of the Lord, the visiting missionaries returned to their country and our church was to “take the harvest to the barn.” It is sad and even

embarrassing to have to say that not a single one of the “converts” became a member of our church. When I consulted with the pastor on this result, which I neither desired nor expected, he said that he had expected that would be the case. When I asked him why then he invited STM groups to visit our church, he said laconically, “Because they always leave something.”

Apparently this church was not the only one to have spurious results. In the survey, 35% said that STM produces results that do not last. 26% state that STM is of greater benefit to the visiting missionary than to the church that receives the visit. 14% believe that STM is a “light” mission phenomenon, explaining that they mean mission without much effort. There are minorities at either extreme. The ultra-positivists (7%) maintain that STM is more efficient than traditional missions. Some critics consider that STM is tourism dressed up as mission (5%) and that it damages the national church it aims to help (2%).

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### **Notions, Presuppositions, and Myths about Finances**

STM in general—and those trips that are carried out in other countries in particular—requires a heavy financial investment. On this point, it is evident that Paraguayan believers cannot conceive that visiting missionaries could be paying their fares and living expenses out of their own money, especially when they are high school or college students. Of the multiple options that could be marked in



this question, only 16% “believe”—without being certain of their “belief”—that the missionaries cover their own STM expenses. A large majority (77%) believe that a mission organization—such organizations tend to have unlimited resources though no one knows where they come from—meets the expenses of these operations. 40% believe that the churches that send

the missionaries are paying for this adventure. Some people (16%) think that national churches, those that receive STM visits, should share the expenses. A small proportion (7%) think that the financing comes from a non-Christian NGO.

### **Expectations and the Desired and Actual Benefits**

Given that STM is primarily from rich countries to poor countries, the question arises: What do believers from a poor country expect from their brothers and sisters in the faith who come to visit from a rich country? Contrary to some of the prejudices heard, the Paraguayan believers who were surveyed are not interested solely in the foreigners’ money. 70% of those surveyed think that a group of missionaries from a rich country that visits a church in a poor country should offer spiritual help such as special programs, preaching, and teaching, to the church they visit. 60% (the survey allowed more than one option to be marked) think that the spiritual help should be given together with some material help. This aid could consist of money, building projects, books, and other materials to build up the Christian life. However, only 16% think that the visitors should leave an offering for the church, and a small minority of 7% think that the pastor of the national church should receive an



offering from the visitors. The consciousness of being poor and unable to offer material things to the visitors is deeply rooted in Paraguayan mentality, since only 7% think that the visitors should take gifts and mementoes from the church they visit. This result is counter to my own experience where I have seen Paraguayan believers being generous in giving small gifts and mementoes when they bid farewell to their new friends after an STM.

### **Motives for Mission**

When asked why people are willing to sacrifice their time (vacations) and come to an unknown country to help an unknown church consisting of people unknown to the visitors, Paraguayan believers consider that the desire to see something new, whether at a tourist level or for their spiritual life, is a higher priority for the visitors than a clear call from God to do mission work. 67% of those surveyed think that most visiting missionaries participate in STM in order to see another country and incidentally do something for the Lord. 60% (again, more than one option could be marked) think that missionaries come to experience God at work in their own life. 42% think that the visitors come to encourage and strengthen local believers, and only a third (33%) think that STM reflects a genuine missionary interest. 26% of those surveyed also marked the option that STM is carried out in order to live a “Christian adventure” that will enrich their “missionary” CV. Although the majority of those surveyed think that the “adventure” factor plays an important part in motivating STM, none of them thinks that missionaries come only to do tourism, for none marked the option “to do tourism and appease their conscience through a pseudo-missionary activity.”

## Difficulties in the Missionary's Contextualization

Most missionaries who participate in an STM have not had a broad theological, missiological, or anthropological training for the mission field, as career missionaries usually have. The preparation to meet and face the culture of a new country is sometimes limited to a few hours. During my time as a student in the United States, I was twice invited to introduce STM participants to Latin American language

and culture. In both cases I was given one hour to teach basic aspects of the host culture. In many cases the visiting missionaries did not have a good grasp of the language of the country they would be visiting, in this case Spanish. In relation to this fact, 81% of those surveyed considered that this obstacle hinders the mission work.



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One of the aspects linked to contextualization and identification with the local culture is accommodations. In earlier days, members of an STM would stay in the Sunday school classes of the church they were visiting. Some would sleep in tents that they brought with them. At other times they were lodged in the homes of church members or at a Christian retreat center on the outskirts of town. Over time,

more and more groups have chosen to stay in hotels. Some of the reasons for this include the following:

- a. Hotels in the third world are relatively cheap (USD 10-30 per night) for people from the developed world and offer greater facilities and comforts than family homes, tents, or camps.
- b. Because of their northern culture, missionaries need their sphere of privacy. It is exhausting for a visitor from the northern hemisphere to live in a family home, probably sharing a room with one of the family members, or, in extreme cases, with a pet. If the linguistic barrier is added to this lack of privacy, the stress caused by culture shock is guaranteed.
- c. It is assumed that a “poor” family will feel uncomfortable having a “rich” person as a guest. In most cases it is actually the guest who feels uncomfortable on seeing that the family is willing to give all they have in order to give the visitor the greatest possible comfort.

When the theology students were asked about where STM participants should stay, 79% stated that it should be with a local family. Only 7% said it should be a hotel, and 5% thought the campsite was a good option. These results show that Paraguayan Christians cannot understand why visiting missionaries prefer to stay in an expensive hotel (all hotels are expensive to locals) instead of having close fellowship with a Christian family.

### Openness to STM

In attempting to measure the openness of the students to STM, I discovered that in general there is a very positive

attitude toward this mission movement. Two thirds (66%) of those surveyed stated that they would like a group of missionaries to visit their church as part of an STM. A significant proportion (24%) was unsure about this proposal, and 10% would prefer not to receive STM in their church.

The figures were different, however, when they were asked if they would be willing to receive missionary guests in their homes. In that case, 88% were willing to offer hospitality to foreigners, 10% were unsure, and only 2% were unwilling.

Openness to STM is also evident in the willingness to personally participate in a mission experience of that sort. Although only 66% would like to receive an STM visit in their own church, 75% would be willing to participate in an STM if the opportunity should arise. The survey did not specify whether the STM would take them to another country or whether they would remain in known territory. In my own experience as a lecturer and director of a theological institution that carries out STM every year at a national and international level, it is much easier to enthuse theology students to participate in STM that takes them outside the country than to take part in those within the country. The remaining 25% were equally divided among those who were unsure and those who would not like to take part in this kind of mission.

### **Prejudices, Attitudes, and Relationships**

I have sometimes heard, both in North and South America, that Latin Americans receive STM groups only because they are interested in the North Americans' money. I cannot deny that there have been many cases where "clever" Christian or not-so-Christian people have taken advantage of the

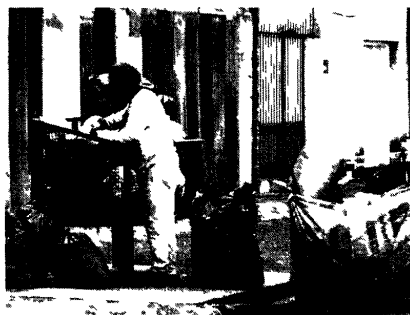
naiveté and kindness of the visitors who had greater material resources. However, in my research I discovered that most Paraguayan believers are interested in STM not for the money but for the relationships and friendships this type of mission enables. This discovery is coherent with Latin American culture, which is far more relationship-oriented than goal-oriented. I know Paraguayan families that have received visits from missionaries, and years later they are keeping up the relationship through letters and e-mail.

We must also mention the attitude that many STM participants have toward countries, churches, church leaders, and believers in general in the third world and Latin America in particular. During my time in the United States, I saw many groups leave on STM to different parts of the world. I heard projects and objectives before they left and testimonies on their return, and sometimes they made me sick. It seemed that those in charge of mission departments in US American churches sold to young people and adults the image of Christians in Latin America as beggars in order to move their hearts to mercy and their hands and feet to action. Many US American Christians are unaware that the gospel reached Latin America 200 years ago and that there are many strong and growing

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'Puppet evangelism'  
is one of STM's most common tools

churches in this part of the continent. Some groups of young people prepared to teach local pastors how to evangelize their neighbors or to do open air evangelism. They returned with hearts full of joy because of the wonders God had done through them in that "dark place," and they never even noticed that the pastors have already been doing that kind of work for twenty years, before these young people were even born! Other groups

rehearsed with puppets in order to teach Sunday school teachers a "new" way to take the gospel to children. There were groups that practiced Spanish choruses from the sixties because they did not know that many Latin American churches have sophisticated, up-to-date, and professional praise teams. These embarrassing situations show why it is important for the STM group to visit the place beforehand, so that they will be well informed of the situation they will meet on arrival.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that many Paraguayan believers are not familiar with the mission method known as short-term missions. Those who do know what it is see it as something positive, but not for the great results this method produces; rather, for the relationships that can be established between locals and visitors.

On the basis of relationship, we, as Latin American Christians, would like STM 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 thus—living together—to learn from one another and teach one another. Then we will realize that we did not “go on a mission trip,” but we visited family members, brothers and sisters we had not met or had not seen for a very long time. And, as in family visits where, on top of celebrating our *fileo* love, we help the hosts in their daily tasks, the visitors will help the local church in their tasks, and thus the body of Christ will be strengthened and the Kingdom of God will be extended.

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