

Towards a Missiologically and Morally Responsible Short-Term Ministry: Lessons Learned in the Development of Church Partnership Evangelism



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What does the image of a person shaking fruit off a fruit tree only to leave it on the ground to rot remind you of? For many it represents the long-term effectiveness of many short-term mission projects. In Russia for example, in the wake of *glasnost*, many church leaders critically referred to short-term missions (STM) as “*express missions*”... a periodic, enthusiastic shaking of the trees by foreign Christians, many of whom were never seen again! Unfortunately, in some circles the expressions of some short-term activity have been rather self-serving. All of which has led us to observe, on occasion, that apparently in North America we have discovered “a means to give to ourselves and call it missions” (Cook 2005, 57). While not all organizations fall into this category, recent trends in Canadian



Church Partnership Evangelism (CPE) is a ministry designed to equip and engage the Body of Christ in evangelism and discipleship with the goal of establishing contextually prevailing churches. Working with host and guest Christians, CPE seeks to engage believers in morally and missiologically responsible international ministry experiences. CPE does not pretend to be able to do the task of host believers and/or missionaries but seeks to work collaboratively with host leaders to carry forward the work they are engaged in. Church Partnership Evangelism describes itself as a short-term ministry for a long-term mission and is designed to be an expression of a local church’s outreach ministry. In order to do so, CPE has intentionally sought to address a number of concerns associated with the short-term mission phenomenon and provide a few lessons that have been learned along the way.

churches suggest that many participants see short-term mission sojourns primarily as a means to deepen their own spiritual lives and develop themselves on a personal level (Berard et al. 2006, 39).

Over the years Church Partnership Evangelism (CPE) has sought to be sensitive to concerns expressed by the global church regarding STM (Cerrón 2006; Eitzen 2006; Landa 2006; Márquez 2006). Of particular concern is the angst that the short-term mission movement has created for missionaries who often see these experiences as an interruption and distraction to their work and principal calling (Adeney 2003; Parrott 2004; Van Engen 2000). When combined with a lack of cultural sensitivity to local traditions and customs, the problem is compounded (Cerrón 2006; Landa 2006; Eitzen 2006; Vílchez-Blancas 2006). Detractors lament the damage that poorly designed STM programs create. Mission observers like Miriam Adeney question the message that the STM movement sends to supporting churches. Promotional literature often gives the idea that missions can be done in quick, simple and convenient ways. "By definition," writes Adeney, "short-term missions have only a short time in which to 'show a profit,' to achieve predefined goals. This can accentuate our American idols of speed quantification, compartmentalization, money, achievement and success" (2003, 86).

CPE is an attempt to address the "*flash in the pan*" effect of many short-term ministry excursions by developing a missiologically and morally responsible approach to short-term intercultural ministry (Holzmann 1988). Having engaged in short-term ministries in some thirty plus countries, Church Partnership Evangelism has developed a number of convictions that have shaped the way it seeks to implement short-term ministry experiences.

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The designation “short-term missions” has always been disconcerting and somewhat oxymoronic. Nevertheless, recognizing what has been, in many ways, an effective (Cook 2005; Tuttle 2000) high impact movement (Hawthorne 1992; McDonough 1996) it would be inappropriate to dismiss out of hand everything associated with “short-term missions” (Harris 2002; Tiplady 2001; Van Engen 2000).

What needs to be stated unequivocally is that mission itself is not short-term. Mission takes long-term commitment, long-term effort, and it is the result of a long-term burden. For this reason we like to refer to Church Partnership Evangelism as a *short-term ministry*. In fact, Church Partnership Evangelism is designed to be a *short-term ministry for long-term mission*.

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We use the designation “short-term missions” as a communications concession. Recognizing that a CPE encounter is a ministry expression that takes place in a limited period of time, we aim to catalyze a lasting discipline of ministry in the host church and its participants. As such, CPE prefers above all else to be considered a **catalytic model** for equipping and engaging the body of Christ in evangelism and discipleship with the aim of establishing contextually prevailing churches.

From its inception, CPE was designed to be a ministry that was carried out in the context of the local church, sensitive to the changing dynamics in the global church, all the while being informed by a long-term mission strategy generated by both receiving and sending churches. CPE seeks to be a long-term local church based ministry committed to being a catalyst within the existing framework of ministries, denominations, societies, national associations, and international church groups. CPE is not

an end in itself and is prepared to disband when it ceases to be useful.

With this in mind, Church Partnership Evangelism is continually examining its motivation and seeking to minimize the factors that might relegate it to being a “flash in the pan” STM organization. What follows are a number of critiques that have been leveled at the short-term mission movement. Each critique is followed by a response as CPE has sought to develop, both at the receiving (host) and sending (guest) sites. We conclude by expressing a number of convictions or overarching findings gleaned from eighteen years of ministry engagement in thirty-plus countries.

A. Negative Factors on the Receiving Side (Host Church)

1. **Critique:** Poor and hasty pre-ministry planning and set up on the receiving end (Espinoza 2006; Farrell 2006).

Response: Church Partnership Evangelism has attempted to commit itself to a process of careful pre-ministry set up. In-country visits by set-up personnel to meet with host partners are critical for laying the groundwork for healthy long-term relationships. Furthermore, in an effort to

minimize disruptions to an international worker’s ministry (Adeney 2003; Farrell 2006; Holzmann 1988), CPE has sought to connect directly with host country church leaders.



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Church-to-church relationships allow for greater buy in by host and guest church leaders (Alegre 2006; Espinoza 2006; Farrell 2006; Márquez 2006). Both guests and hosts are responsible for various aspects associated with the implementation of a Church Partnership Evangelism encounter that is carried out as follows.

Preceding the Ministry. Host churches that have invited guests from other countries begin by identifying key friends, family members, neighbors, and coworkers with whom they have established meaningful relationships. They along with their guest church (from some other location/country) begin a three- to six-month covenant to pray daily for the people they have identified. This intercessory ministry is essential in preparing people to proclaim and to receive the gospel. Once this groundwork has been laid, a guest CPE team joins their host to conduct a week of ministry.



Seven Day Ministry Event. Every day begins with training in dialogue evangelism and discipleship for host and guest alike. During the rest of the day teams made up of guests and hosts participate in prearranged visits with the people they have been praying for. Using the guests' presence and testimony they engage in conversation, in which many people hear the gospel in a sensitive probing manner. As professions of faith are made, return visits are scheduled for discipleship. (Further information at www.cpeonline.org.) These moments have proved to be rich times of fellowship, where lasting relationships are forged

in the context of ministry. The set up process becomes steadily less demanding over time as the partnership develops, *although it never becomes less important!*

2. **Critique:** Limited ownership (Alegre 2006; Farrell 2006; Landa 2006) or financially motivated (Maslucán 2006) host church. Many receiving churches are only in it for the economic benefits or “for what the visitors leave behind.”

Response: Church Partnership Evangelism seeks to work only upon the request of churches in the host country. Sending and receiving churches need to affirm that their relationship runs deeper than the depth of their pockets. Host churches are not offered long-term financial support or any promises to that extent. We want to assist participating churches simply to “catch fish” and to be convinced that “the coin is in the fish’s mouth” (see Matthew 17.24-27). Therefore, what is offered is a commitment to work in relationship, sharing the dream of helping establish a prevailing church-planting church. From there we will see how God leads in the development of the partnership!

“When we make finances a ‘key’ to world evangelization,” writes Craig Ott, “the danger is great that we are basing our mission strategy on cultural, materialistic values, rather than biblical principles” (1993, 1). *CPE has consciously chosen to let the Spirit lead where it will.* Partnering on the spiritual level to engage in ministry *is also more easily replicated by less affluent churches.* After all, the gospel has always been intended to be the good news “from everywhere to everyone” (Escobar 2003).

3. **Critique:** Growing complexity in the application of ministry (Eitzen 2006). In time, organizations tend to move towards greater complexity and increased cost.

Response: The challenge with some STM, as Eitzen rightly points out, appears when the hosts seek to replicate the over-all format of an STM ministry abroad. “The program worked well as long as all the expenses of travel, accommodation, and materials were covered by [the North American ministry].” However, when the initiative was left in the hands of the local churches, “the missionary spark was extinguished due to the simple fact that the financial cost of this kind of evangelism is very high” (2006). Dr. Eitzen’s critique is a reminder that STM needs to be clear in what is being touted as being reproducible.

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CPE subscribes to the idea that we need to do a few things well, reduced to the basics in order to leave an ongoing impact. Because the actual CPE ministry is so simple, many host churches adopt the relational and dialogical methodology in the local context long after the guests leave. It is this simple model of equipping and engaging the body of Christ in relational and dialogical evangelism that CPE seeks to catalyze and leave behind. A Russian pastor recently reported to his director after a CPE team left: “We are starting up the whole thing again in a month and we realize we don’t even need their presence.”

4. **Critique:** Insensitivity of guests who impose their agenda on their hosts (Farrell 2006; Eitzen 2006; Maslucán 2006).

Response: CPE is designed to empower the individual members of the body of Christ. All CPE outreach is designed

to flow out of preexisting relationships and ongoing prayer covenants of the local believers. Holzmann (1988) raises insightful questions regarding the philosophical underpinnings of the STM movement. “Well-structured short-term programs are rare. Fewer yet, however, are the people who go on short-terms to achieve well thought-out strategically valid purposes” (1988, 10).

Church Partnership Evangelism works to enable host believers to share *their* faith in *their* communities under the leadership of *their* pastors for the purposes of planting churches or of establishing new believers in a discipling community of faith. Beyond training and working alongside believers in sharing the gospel, host and guest are trained and supported as they engage in a one-on-one discipling ministry. CPE commits, along with host leadership, to make sure that any person that is lead to Christ will get an immediate follow up visit. The second visit is the most important and participants are expected to make it! A critical aspect of these working teams is that *there are no conversations that occur during the week of ministry in which the local believer has not been active*. This assures that when the guests leave, ministry begun during the week of activities can continue!

Eitzen’s observation (2006) regarding the spurious results of CPE ministries in many Paraguayan churches is the natural outcome of an encounter that failed to capture the aforementioned philosophical framework of the ministry. Since ministry is carried out in teams made up of hosts and guests, follow-up encounters are a natural setting to develop an ongoing relationship between the one professing faith and a local host believer. It is in this context that the “*Latin American culture of courtesy*,” that Eitzen (2006) suggests is partly responsible for the inflated commitment levels, can

be assessed. Through meaningful dialogue at this stage, motives can be discerned and evaluated.

5. Critique: Short-term partnerships lead to short-term productivity and short-term relationships (Arroyo 2006; Maslucán 2006; Sallandt 2006). The fickle nature of the North American church makes it difficult for many churches to make long-term commitments with their hosts.

Response: The ministry in the partnering churches is designed to be a renewable encounter to be carried out multiple times as part of an ongoing relationship. This ongoing partnership is made between a host church and its counterparts from a guest church in another location/country. It is common to hear of leaders from a host church being asked to come and visit their guest church.

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Calvin College sociologist Kurt Ver Beek (Priest and Ver Beek 2005) reminds us that one of the main challenges of many short-term ministries is the high percentage (76.4%) of guest participants who do not stay in contact with their hosts after the trip (2005, 4). Ver Beek calls for short-term missions groups to be more intentional about assisting participants in seeing that their experience is “one part of a larger commitment to learn more, pray more, give more, and do more for the families, church community and country they visited” (2005, 4).

We certainly concur and are delighted by the intentionality evident in numerous partnerships. Recently a Canadian pastor returned with a group to the same host church he had worked with a year earlier. The host church pastor commented, “We never thought you would come

back. So many others have come and said they would return but didn't. Now we know this is for real."

B. Negative Factors on the Sending Side (Guest Church)

1. **Critique:** Short-term ministry teams made up of individuals from a variety of churches rather than groups from one church.

Response: Church Partnership Evangelism *does not target the recruitment of individuals* to comprise a short-term team. CPE is interested in recruiting churches to establish a long-term partnership and send out from them small short-term teams for shared ministry.

We have observed that individuals with little or no support from other like-minded people lose their passion for what they've seen and done much more quickly. The renewed passion for ministry generated by a group of people returning to their local church not only increases the chances of sustainability but also provides an opportunity to make a greater impact on their home church.

2. **Critique:** No follow through on post-ministry commitments (Farrell 2006; Maslucán 2006).

Response: The key to ministry follow through are lasting partnerships that create and encourage accountability. Repeated exposure to one another in renewed ministries encourages a careful and strategic follow through to ministry goals for ongoing discipleship and church planting. CPE desires to unite partner churches worldwide, to inspire one another to carry out the church's ministry mandates. These partnerships provide windows through which the guest Christian and host local church can view the world and the broader work of missions. Such partnerships strengthen the

local church's resolve to missions wherever their church and its affiliation are committed and also strengthen its focus on nurturing global Christians (Borthwick 1991; Kane 1986; Krishnan 1989).

Furthermore, an active and intentional partnership should stimulate the local church to build ministries reflecting a dynamic equivalent at home for empowering lay people in evangelism, discipleship, and church planting.

3. **Critique:** Limited or no ongoing communication between the host and guest churches and/or ministries (Maslucán 2006; Arroyo 2006).

Response: Church Partnership Evangelism encourages an active, ongoing process of communication to continue throughout the year. *A ministry of mutual prayer and praise as well as information sharing* is not beyond the sight of modern communications technology. CPE encourages church-to-church partnerships. We also seek to enable churches to develop long-term relationships, and we work with churches to develop the infrastructure for a meaningful relationship to occur.

While we do not know how the Spirit of God will move as followers of Jesus from both the host and guest countries work together, we stand amazed at how God orchestrates initiatives beyond the scope of CPE's mandate as participants listen to God! CPE encourages all initiatives, particularly those involving economic resources to be funneled through the appropriate channels found both in the host as well as the guest country (i.e. local church leadership, missions boards, national church structures, etc.).

4. **Critique:** Exhaustive cost considerations that cannot be sustained except for a short-term push (Eitzen 2006; Landa 2006; Maslucán 2006).

Response: Many churches harness major investments of money to send individuals or even large teams overseas. These teams go to places and peoples with whom they have enjoyed no ties before the experience and with whom they will enjoy no ties after the sojourn. Because of Church Partnership Evangelism's commitment to encourage multiple shared ministry expressions, the church can sustain a long-term benefit from the trips. Furthermore, it is not necessary to send large teams overseas in a "once and for all" fashion. Small teams uniquely formed for the occasion to visit their partner church limit the financial stress put on the sending local church. In fact, when this is done, individuals in the church begin preparing to go by saving funds and scheduling time for the purpose of going when it is their turn or the opportunity presents itself.

Nevertheless, the cost of doing STM is significant and must be monitored! Parrott observed in his study that \$10 million dollars a year is being spent in STM in one Central American country alone. "The short-term missions market is consuming a large proportion of the available resources for the total missions effort" (2004, 357).

We have always been sensitive to the economic draw that a CPE trip might have on a local church's mission budget. CPE was originally initiated within a tradition with a strong missions legacy (Christian and Missionary Alliance) and a central funding mechanism for supporting its missionaries. Careful not to redirect some of those funds, CPE has intentionally sought to work with local church leaders to resource trips with funds above and beyond the general missions budget. CPE has observed that those churches who engage in a CPE encounter experience stark increases in the money given to their long-term missions commitments.

CPE concurs with Dr. Apolos Landa's observation that short-term missions "are expensive but are worth every cent *if they manage* to establish a relationship and generate processes of empowerment and change through long-term local ministries" (2006).

5. **Critique:** Shortsighted strategies that are "experiences" for the sole benefit of the guests. Consequently there is no motivation to assess follow-through in conserving the ministry results and in building upon those results (Eitzen 2006; Maslucán 2006).

Response: Church Partnership Evangelism wants to avoid paying verbal homage to the ideas of evangelism, discipleship, and church planting without a clear structure for accomplishing those goals. Invitations for ongoing ministry encounters are generally initiated by the hosts and come as a result of the value they place on the ministry. Ultimately they are the ones that judge usefulness of the ministry, not the guests! Cerrón acknowledges that when the aforementioned have been incorporated, "God [has] blessed not only the foreign missionaries, be they Canadians or Peruvians, but also the local churches that were committed to the CPE ministry" (2006).

Ver Beek's research on STM indicates that quite apart from all that takes place on a sojourn, "how the community feels about itself and the level of motivation after the group leaves" is more important. "If community members feel empowered, to do good work together, and if the STM group helped them to see their own strengths and abilities—then they will likely keep doing exciting work on their own" (Priest and Ver Beek 2005, 4).

Significant Overarching Convictions/Findings

As a result of building long-term relationships, CPE has learned valuable overarching lessons. These lessons should prove to be instructive to all engaged in reaching the world for Christ. In striving to be morally and missiologically responsible in our ministries we must remind ourselves that the primary agent of grace in all ministries is the Holy Spirit. He creates connections that span great cultural and linguistic divides.

1. *Ministry with Maximum Spiritual Impact.* For the greatest spiritual dividends, ministry must be targeted where the world, the flesh, and the devil are fixing their cross hairs. We believe that their aim is fixed at undermining the work of equipping and engaging the body in evangelism, discipleship, and church or cell planting.

A person may respond to multiple STM opportunities by saying, "I can do that." But rarely does a person respond to the invitation to go and minister side by side with host brothers and sisters from another culture; going with them to their friends and family members to share the good news of what God has done in their life; and then to commit to return to those who have made professions of faith; begin the process of establishing them in Christ and release the host Christians to become disciple making disciples with the understanding... "I can do that!"

A ministry set at the cross hairs of the world, the flesh, and the devil and dependent upon something more than what we can offer provides a context in which God can do great things. Participants are more likely to experience personal transformation in a catalytic exercise that requires them to stretch on a deeply spiritual level!

2. *Transformational moments occur when truth has been catalyzed into action. Renewal is a sovereign work of God where his Spirit comes to accelerate and intensify the Church in spiritual growth and knowledge of God.* There is very little that an individual can do to cause a revival on this scale. Yet when we step out in prayerful obedience to the call of God upon our lives to reach the lost, to be disciple makers, God's Spirit delights to rush in and empower his servants! *When we step forward to act upon truth, when we catalyze truth into action, the Holy Spirit gladly comes to manifest himself in the effort.* He is the change maker, the one who transforms us at the point of action. We must then engage in ministries that demand his part and where our part appears foolish without him.

3. *Dialogue in outreach... understanding the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.* We believe that God's Holy Spirit is already active in the lives of those we seek to bring to the Lord Jesus. In particular, we believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in all people convicting them of sin, righteousness and judgment.

We also believe that the Christian, filled with the Holy Spirit, is used of God to complete the Holy Spirit's contending ministry by bringing the witness of Jesus Christ and his gospel to those the Spirit is bringing under conviction.

With this in mind we do not seek to confront directly any individual's religion and belief system. Instead our approach is to recognize the Spirit's impulse in people and ask them questions accordingly. We ask questions that allow them to tell us how God is at work in their lives and how they are sensing and responding to his convicting work. The most important words a person can hear in coming to Christ are

Social care is not an attempt to improve upon God's justice. It should not be motivated out of guilt or a sense of fair play. It must flow out of a spirit of sacrifice and love. It is an expression of our own loving intercessions for the lost.

not necessarily our words but their own words. As they speak truth reflecting the work of the Spirit in their lives and as we listen to them, they are softened by our respect and by a reflection upon what God has shown them. Then, having listened to them, we earn the right to speak truth back into their lives. We take what they have shared with us and then we place Jesus and his gospel alongside their own witness and at that point there is a connection made to their hearts that is powerful. It is a conversation of grace to grace.

Dialogue evangelism calls for the following: Prayerful preparation of those sharing their faith; Jesus followers who are filled with the Holy Spirit; a willingness to ask honest questions with an intent to listen to personal answers; an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying into people's lives; a respect for those to whom we seek to win to Christ; and a readiness to bring them and their stories near to the story of Jesus and his gospel! The approach is simple, biblical, natural, and wonderfully powerful. It bears good fruit.

4. *Moving with a specific intent to lead people to Jesus Christ in all we do, even social care.* CPE does not use social care as a hook to the gospel or a strategy for presenting the gospel. We encourage social care as a command to the Christian! *It is a matter not of evangelism but of Christlikeness.* But we must recognize that even in the care of others we are motivated by one desire: to make the Lord Jesus known to others. *Social care is not the other side of Christian ministry;*

it must always be submerged within the stream of proclaiming Christ by living like him. Social care is not an attempt to improve upon God's justice. It should not be motivated out of guilt or a sense of fair play. It must flow out of a spirit of sacrifice and love. It is an expression of our own loving intercessions for the lost.

5. *Establish a prayer covenant and keep it!*

We are learning all the time the importance of intercession and discovering that intercession always precedes Spirit-blessed encounters. Intercession does more than prepare "the soil." It prepares "the sower" to go out in tears. *An intercessor is someone who is willing to be the answer to the prayers that he or she is raising to God.* (see "Prayer Covenant" at www.cpeonline.org.)

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Conclusion

Church Partnership Evangelism is one expression of what can be done to intentionally address some of the challenges associated with short-term ministry. CPE is by no means perfect. We serve in a state of creative flux. Experience indicates that from the North American side, STM groups must work hard to fail. The newness of the experience, exotic locations, and the highly relational nature of host people ensure a measure of success for every short-term ministry. The real issue is whether or not our activities are a "help that helps" or a "help that hinders."

We can expect the short-term movement to continue to generate all kinds of new activity. The confluence of continued economic wealth and the desire among many churches to have a deeper involvement in the mission

enterprise (Lundy 2005) should spawn hundreds of new STM initiatives.

For this and many other reasons, it falls to the church to critically evaluate its ministry. We are delighted that a number of “Short-Term Missions Codes of Best Practice” (see, for example, www.paoc.org/missions/shorttermmissions.html#code) have been developed (Page 2003) that give churches a framework from which to work. We need to go further! Missiologists, accustomed to examining trends and issues, must enter the conversation and use their skills to assist the church in discerning the appropriateness of many of its mission-oriented activities in order to continue to develop missiologically and morally responsible missional activities.

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