

Short-Term Missions: Analysis and Proposals

Rodrigo Maslucán

Introduction

Short-term missions (STM) is a relatively new phenomenon in North America, Canada, Germany, England, and other countries in Europe. Therefore, there are many aspects of STM that need to be analyzed: how and why they are implemented; their positive and negative aspects in relation to long-term career missions; the new missiologies and how they are to be understood in terms of globalization and post-modernity; and the challenges to churches and theological and missiological centers. In this paper, I present a basic analysis and proposals for the work of churches and short-term missions with a view to providing a description and guidelines to be followed in the future.

Rodrigo Maslucan is a minister in the Presbyterian and Reformed Church of Peru. He earned his BA in theology from Lima Evangelical Seminary, holds a degree in missiology from the Orlando E. Costas Graduate School of Mission, and is a theological and missiological consultant of the Association of Shipibo-Conibo churches in the Amazon region of Peru.



May the Lord illumine missiologists to study the model of missions I present so it can help churches better understand the subject, lead to better work with short-term missions, and make a contribution to mission training centers.

Analysis

Motives

On the basis of my observations in Peru and conversations held with several pastors, the reasons that prompt churches to send or receive short-term mission groups include love, tourism, adventure, the thrill of getting to know other places, and, in some cases, the desire to learn from Peruvians or other nationals.

As an example of love and service we find that some groups seek contact with Peruvians, even asking to be hosted by church families. Others make themselves at home in hotels, regardless of whether they are three-, four-, or five-star establishments, and they give greatly of themselves in service. They visit churches and project sites, take photographs and video, and give money and gifts.

Some receiving churches appear to seek economic support and gifts as well as friendships. Others seek a mutual relationship of getting to know each other and sharing spiritual riches, thus learning skills and abilities from each other as peers.



Videography is a core phenomenon in short-term missions

Love, service, and establishing long-term relationships are motives that encourage STM groups and receiving churches to take action. The purposes and aims of both parties are important aspects of this kind of missions.

Love should be a motive that seeks to be like God's love (John 3.16), so big that it could not possibly be any greater because it was demonstrated in the gift of his only Son to the lost world, to serve and to die the most awful death of that time. When missionary groups and receiving churches are motivated by "love for the Christ-less world," they are expressing the supreme quality of God's love that was shown in the fact that "his Son, the only begotten, he gave," following the Greek word order that highlights the greatness of the gift by placing it before the verb (Aland 1968).

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Regarding the intersection of love and coordination for the visits of STM groups, pastor Percy Chumbe said, "There was practically no coordination; they brought their program. When we gave our opinion, they took no notice of it. So, what love or service can we talk about? They came to do as they wished" (Chumbe 2005). This experience does not reflect the majority of STM, but it was so in this case.

We must ask: What were the motives that brought mission groups that did not respect leaders or churches? Where is the expression of the love of God who is the supreme missionary?

Initiatives

The initial idea to undertake STM arose abroad; it now arises on all sides of the oceans. Career missionaries in Peru or Peruvian pastors who travel abroad are generally the contacts for short-term missions in local churches, rather than the denominations. If the denominations do not take initiative, or take it but fail to develop it, then local churches

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take their own initiative. We also find that local churches invite pastors from nearby churches of the same denomination to meet and chat with those in charge of missionary groups. One local church thus serves as a contact for other local churches.

The party that takes the initiative should invite the other to meet and converse as equals, get to know each other, see the reality of the church, and share plans, projects, vision, and mission. Where there is mutual respect and consideration and neither party is domineering or authoritarian, such missionary work is worthy and honorable before God and the world.

The initiatives that lead to sitting down together despite differences in culture and language forge a spirit of unity and good relationship from the outset. If these efforts are maintained and developed throughout the mission process, the practical expression is "We are one" because there is joint work by locals and foreigners; they glorify God and build up the church, and the world sees the good witness.

In order for the initiatives of the local, national, or sending churches to be healthy, it is necessary that both parties establish good cooperation and coordination.

The Beneficiaries

Both sending and receiving groups are beneficiaries, but who benefits most in short-term missions?

The Local Church

The local church benefits in the direct work of the visiting groups in their skills or professions, building, flooring, plumbing, evangelism, drama, music, leadership training, donations of clothing, shoes, medicines, etc.

Such help can be damaging to the church if the visitors do not value the national church members and include them in working together under the principles of mutual learning, giving and receiving warmth and affection, or when the members of the church do not participate in working with the visitors. For example, national doctors and nurses should be involved in medical campaigns; builders, electricians, and plumbers need to be incorporated in building projects.

The other benefit to the church is the relationship with the churches of the visiting groups and the personal contacts with members that extend to the long term. Some churches talk of a permanent relationship and working together over many decades.



When members of both the sending and receiving churches work together in STM projects, long-term relationships can be developed.

STM Teams

The STM groups have the chance to see another country and another culture as well as to do tourism. I wonder how much this means to tourism specifically in Peru (hotels, restaurants, visits to tourist sites). In other words, the country benefits as well.

Serving in God's kingdom in unity and cooperation, with blessings redounding on both sides, and with prayers and gratitude for having worked together as members of one body, the church universal of our Lord expresses that we are a people and community of those who serve, both locals and foreigners.

There are also spiritual benefits. Some young people give their lives to God and even wish to be baptized in the church they are visiting, and they return to their church of origin with the experience of conversion and sanctification. In this case the "missionaries" have been evangelized. This factor can motivate churches to send young people on short-term missions. Adults also experience a living faith and a joyous and transforming liturgy.

Most of those who serve do so with great joy, serving according to their profession, ability, or skill. The satisfaction of serving is another benefit to the visitor. Furthermore, the experience of working abroad can be an asset for academic purposes. Serving in God's kingdom in unity and cooperation, with blessings redounding on both sides, and with prayers and gratitude for having worked together as members of one body, the church universal of our Lord expresses that we are a people and community of those who serve, both locals and foreigners.

The Cost

Cost is another factor that should be taken into account in regard to STM.

I have observed that churches that receive STM have sometimes participated in the overall planning. At times both parties make preparations through announcements, fliers, accommodation and meal arrangements, and the visiting groups often cover the cost of room and board. This cost is a tiny proportion of the total cost each missionary group represents.

What is the cost for each member of a missionary group that comes to Peru? For a group visiting Peru for ten to twelve days, the cost is between \$1,800 and \$2,000 US dollars per person, including travel, hotel accommodation, and meals. Pastor Hunter Farrell voices the observation of one pastor in Lima: "If they sent us the money they spend on their international travel, we could build more churches, feed more children, train more pastors" (Farrell 2006). This sentiment is common among leaders who witness so much STM activity.

The implicit critique is reasonable. For example, on a visit to the Korean church in Zapallal, Peru, I found a group of eight visiting Korean young



Some question the value of STM groups engaging in service projects like painting when locals could be employed for the same work.

people sowing grass seed. On another occasion, when I went to a meeting of the Board of the Evangelical Council of Peru, I found a group of young North Americans painting walls in the inner patio. I asked myself, "Missionary groups to paint walls, plant grass, and so on? Could these jobs not be carried out by local church members? Does it make sense to invest so much on these and similar jobs?"

In the closing remarks of his paper, Francisco Cerrón asks, "Are they really conscious of the way money is spent?" (2006). And Montgomery says short-term medical missions "consume too many financial resources and too much expertise and time and produce results that are often insignificant or negative" (2006).

Taking these statements into account, the host churches should have projects that have clear objectives and aims and a program with the joint participation of locals and foreigners. They should define the tasks that can be carried out with the resources that the visitors bring or send. Local church members would gladly give of their time to work, and many are trained painters, gardeners, plumbers, electricians, or builders who are out of work. Using the STM teams' resources to would temporarily provide them a job and alleviate their needs.

The cost of short-term missions should be assessed from the perspective of stewardship of the resources that come from God through churches abroad. Humility is an important element, as is including the local churches and leaders so that the investment plan is worthwhile and appropriate. A salutary lesson in this respect is the case of the Evangelical Presbyterian and Reformed Church of Peru in Iquitos and the surrounding area. The churches abroad that send short-term mission groups have invested heavily in training pastors, purchasing land, and raising buildings, but the

churches have split into three groups. What were the results of the heavy monetary investment? Certainly not an increased witness through the unity of the Body of Christ in Iquitos. Foreign churches, through the mission pastors or coordinators, should sit down as peers with local churches to ensure that the investment of the resources the Lord provides is worthy and fruitful. Every cent will count and short-term missions will be a good investment when partnering churches have thorough short-, medium- and long-term projects in place.

Recommendations

For STM Teams:

- ◆ Ensure that money does not become a motive for imposing or dominating. Do not consider expressions such as, “The dollar rules.”
- ◆ Show interest in getting to know the country and the national church.
- ◆ Take into account the local projects and plans that have clear objectives and aims in order to support and missiologically train the group for those goals.
- ◆ The majority of churches in Peru, at least, do not condone smoking, dancing, or drinking beer. The mission groups should investigate such restrictions in whatever country they plan on visiting and take them into account so that they do not cause serious misunderstandings with the local believers.

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- ◆ The purpose of the trip should be well-defined and the team members familiar with it.
- ◆ Avoid raising expectations and creating dependency. Avoid making promises that will not be kept.
- ◆ Reflect on the role the groups play in the churches they visit.

For the Local Churches:

- ◆ Do not feel incapable of doing work for yourselves or of working together with the visitors.
- ◆ Do not expect to meet the local needs merely by depending on short-term missions. The local church should be the main manager and player; STM carries out a complementary task.
- ◆ Look forward to meeting the mission groups in order to get to know them and fellowship with them as individual people, not as a source and channel of money.
- ◆ Train local participants to understand that they are not to use the visitors or the relationship with them for selfish purposes or for gain beyond that of the church in general.
- ◆ Prepare and train local leaders to receive, serve, and accompany the mission groups both at work and in leisure time.
- ◆ Continue with the work that mission groups were unable to complete.

Proposals

Planning

Cerrón, speaking of planning, said, “when the leadership and members of the STM team had access to joint planning with the receiving churches, respect for these churches grew, and they were seen as equals. The supposed supremacy of the missionary over the local believer was overcome when there had been greater contact prior to the visit of the group of missionaries” (2006).

I wholeheartedly agree with Cerrón’s view. To that end, in order to prepare for worthwhile work in the churches and the STM trip, I propose the following planning process that helps facilitate detailed prior knowledge of what the local church wants, the achieving of these objectives, and the avoidance of so called “religious tourism.”

The Local Church

The work should be planned by the receiving church since it knows what it needs for development. It should not be planned from outside, with the local church considered merely a facilitator.

The objectives, aims, missiological principles, and strategies should be clearly set out and placed in the context of the mission of the church so that the STM groups become well-informed before their visit. There should also be clarity in who benefits and how: which sectors of the church and the community will be the beneficiaries.

The church should have a holistic plan that includes spiritual, psychological, social, physical, cultural, economic, environmental, and human rights aspects, a plan that particularly benefits children, the elderly, the poor, and the neglected.

There should be a clear schedule of times and places of the activities the mission group will carry out. There should be a logistics coordinator whom the person in charge of the visiting group can contact regarding the different aspects of the plan.

Other important information that the church should provide to the STM groups includes:

- ◆ The weather at the time of the visit, mentioning if possible appropriate clothing, temperature range, and height above sea level.
- ◆ Cultural differences and practices that would affect the church's witness.
- ◆ A breakdown of church membership, if possible, including statistical information of children, adolescents, young people, adults, and the elderly by age and gender, so the group has an idea of the distribution before coming to the country.

STM Teams

We have stated that the receiving church needs to draw up the plan. This suggestion implies that the sending churches, or the STM group coordinators, would have to receive the plan or project in advance. It could be done in several ways:

- ◆ By e-mail or a web page.
- ◆ The STM pastor or coordinator travels to the country to meet the pastor or pastoral team and get to know the church and its location.
- ◆ The pastor of the church in the receiving country is invited to the sending country to explain the plan and

share the information that the mission group needs to know for its trip and work.

Receiving the plan would mean that the STM groups could prepare to meet the needs set out in the plan and that the investment in people, projects, and programs would be carefully thought out, thus making long-term benefits more possible. Conversely, it would prevent a casual attitude, the lack of quality in service and the temptation of power over the church being supported from the mere fact of holding the monetary funds.

Joaquín Alegre's experience illustrates the importance of joint planning. "Trip preparation began one year prior. When the Church of Callao found out that Grace Church was going to come to Peru, a series of individual and joint planning meetings (at least five joint meetings) took place to prepare for and organize the trip" (Alegre 2006).

Planning well in advance, taking into account all the details, and interacting between both parties (the local church and the visitors) ensure good work and good results.

Preparation

Once the plan has been drawn up, articulated, and coordinated between the local church and the STM group, preparation is an important step, since, according to Cerrón, "It proves true time and time again that a lack of preparation leads to a series of problems and difficulties that could have been prevented" (2006).

The Local Church

In this important stage everything should be ready a month or two before the mission group arrives. Only a very few aspects should need to be tended to on the first day of

the visit. Here are some guidelines for preparation and organizing for the carrying out of the project or plan:

- ◆ Preparation with Bible studies and prayer on the subject of the church as a Christian community where fellowship, brotherhood, and service evidence love in action, so that the church is ready to receive and interact with the missionaries in the life and mission of the church.

Punctuality, reliability, ability, and love for one another are fundamental.

- ◆ The project or plan should be made known within the church and the whole church well-informed. It is very important for members to feel involved and to pray.
- ◆ Designate a representative or coordinator as the sole communicator from the church for transmitting information to the person in charge of the mission group.
- ◆ Name an administrator of both human and economic resources, whose tasks will include advising on safe places for currency exchange and making recommendations about local transport.
- ◆ Name a director of the project or plan who will have a detailed schedule of the times and types of activities, to avoid last minute improvisations.
- ◆ Provide an interpreter or interpreters (who may alternate according to the activities and the time they have available).
- ◆ If the church is providing room and board, there should be a person responsible for organizing this care.
- ◆ The church members should be organized to participate in the type of work the STM group is carrying out:

evangelism, medical campaigns, building, electricity, plumbing, etc.

Good organization on the part of the local church will lead to efficient and high-quality work with the mission group as the latter serves the Lord and, in his name, serves the church and the community. Punctuality, reliability, ability, and love for one another are fundamental.

STM Teams

If the work of the short-term mission groups is to be a good witness, contributing to church growth and offering thoughtful service in a country with problems of poverty, corruption, violence, cultural, racial, and ethnic discrimination, I consider the following guidelines necessary:

- ◆ Basic information about the local situation of the country being visited must be gathered. In Exodus 3.7-9 we see that God first informs Moses of the situation of his people in Egypt and what he is going to do on Israel's behalf and, subsequently (v. 10), calls Moses for the task. It is necessary to know the local situation in order to understand God's call to service, not to tourism. This preparation should be given both in the church where the group is coming from and on the group's arrival in the country. On one occasion I saw that some members of a mission group had little or no interest in knowing the situation of the local church and the country. It is very important to emphasize learning before doing.

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- ◆ On the basis of the project or work plan, a call for participants should be issued and the candidates should be selected taking into account the activities and whether they are fitted for the work (love, abilities, professionalism, willingness to learn and serve). The candidates need specific information about the work they will be required to do.
- ◆ Recommend that during their stay in the country the group does not smoke nor drink alcohol because many churches consider these activities to be a “bad witness.” Participants should be reminded not to criticize or get frustrated by local lack of punctuality, not to make promises they cannot keep, and to be friendly and respectful towards members of the opposite sex but not too quick to fall in love.
- ◆ Send representatives or establish a coordinator in the receiving country to make detailed arrangements so that the short-term group can serve properly, with the necessary human and economic resources for the project.

Work

I have observed that the work of short-term groups with churches lasts between one and four weeks. What can be done in such a short time? How to ensure optimum results? What can be done so that the joint work ensures mutual giving and learning? Here are some ideas that help answer these questions.

The church that has a plan and prepares to implement it should establish the work to be carried out together with the visitors, clearly and in detail. In working together, there are shared experiences, learning and friendship, and if the

work is not completed, the local church can finish it later by itself. The personal contacts as fellow believers are more important than the work and the projects. If meaningful relationships are to be established, we need to be prepared and willing to develop our unity in Christ without prejudices regarding country of origin, skin color, monetary resources, language, etc.

In Iquitos, Peru, the STM teams working with the Evangelical Reformed Presbyterian Church in the city and along the river banks did all the planning by themselves. If they ever asked for opinions from the national church leaders, they ignored them. They even decided who should be the church pastor. This dynamic creates conflict and division. In the Lord's kingdom we should work in peace and towards peace. This commitment to peace means allowing sufficient time for the visiting mission groups and local churches to express their opinions and listen to each other, both participating fully in the work.

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Assessment

The assessment of the planning and joint work should be carried out with honesty and humility, grounded in God's Word.

Once the "short-term" work is over, it behooves the visiting group and the local pastoral team or church leaders to independently carry out a thorough assessment and then listen together to the assessment reports. There should then be dialog leading to a single assessment that includes proposals for future improvement. This stage should finish with prayer, worship, thanksgiving, confession, and asking

forgiveness. Thus, those who stay and those who leave do so in peace, with their hearts warmed to continue working in unity and cooperation for the extension of God's kingdom.

Follow Up

Follow up should include:

- ◆ Praying for each other and keeping each other informed using various means.
- ◆ The local church continuing with the unfinished tasks. If economic resources are needed in order to finish, the sending churches could continue supporting the work.
- ◆ The church-to-church relationship continuing with a view to becoming permanent, which is helped by having short-, medium- and long-range project goals.

If the STM work is not designed to be a one-time event but to be part of a process towards achieving the objectives and aims of the host church, the mission should take into account what Cook and Van Hoogen call a commitment both during and after the short-term mission work (2006). Sociologist Kurt Ver Beek of Calvin College reports that one of the main challenges of many short-term ministries is the high percentage (76.4%) of guests who do not remain in contact with their hosts after the trip. Ver Beek calls on STM groups to intentionally help participants realize that their experience is part of a bigger commitment to learn more, pray more, give more, and do more for the families, community, church, and country that they visit (Priest and Ver Beek 2005).

To take one example from Peru, the Christian and Missionary Alliance church in Callao, led by pastor Joaquín Alegre, has been working with STM groups from Grace

Church of Minnesota for seventeen years. The results justify the mission trips because there is continuity after each trip, where friendship, knowledge, and mutual learning are deepened (see Alegre 2006).

Conclusion

Short-term mission is just one way of doing mission. If the mission plan is born in the local church; with vision, aims, objectives, scope, and achievements for the short-, medium-, and long-term; and the short-term mission fits into that ecclesiastical and missionary structure in the church as a support instrument; in cooperation and unity; and if the analysis of the proposals expressed in this work are taken seriously by churches and missions, there will be worthy fruit for God's glory.

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