

Short-Term Missions: An Initial Assessment from Experience

Francisco Cerrón

Introduction

Several years ago, around 1975, when I was a recently converted adolescent, full of the fervor of the “Lima al Encuentro con Dios” [Lima Meets God] movement which greatly blessed our city, I had an extremely unpleasant experience with a member of a short-term missions (STM) team. A theater group of young people had come to our church for a series of evangelistic dramas. As a young person keen on practicing the English I had learned at school, I approached one of the members of the group, hoping to begin a friendly chat, but was rebuffed by a reply along the lines of, “We’re better than you because we come from the

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United States, and that's why everyone seeks us out." Over thirty years later, that experience still stands out as a sad memory in my life.

It would be unfair to judge those missionaries on that attitude or to say all missionaries are alike. However, it was one of the experiences that came to mind as I was preparing this paper. I have also undoubtedly had positive and edifying experiences with short-term missionaries.

In recent years, Latin American countries have witnessed the arrival of many groups, from the United States in particular, some from Europe and a few from Asia, that aim to carry out brief mission ministries that are commonly known as "short-term missions." This approach to mission began back in the seventies, particularly with Calvary Chapel and others. An article published in 2006 on the *Christianity Today* web page addresses this way of doing missions:

It has been wildly successful, at least in terms of raw statistics. While the number of long-term missionaries from North America has stayed basically static, the number of American laity involved in short-term projects grew from 22,000 in 1979 to more than a million today. (McQuilkin 2006)

The arrival of these groups nearly always has an evangelistic and social aid aspect that has benefited not only the local churches but also the group sent. However, little has been written from the Latin American perspective regarding the results and evaluation of these experiences. One of the questions we hope to answer in this conference is whether the growth in short-term missions is really beneficial to the church or is a strategy that can be corrected and carried out differently.

Our two-day gathering is very valuable as a means of increasing clarity and carrying out the corresponding assessments to keep past errors from being repeated. These assessments will surely provide us with positive aspects that should be recognized but also with sad and painful experiences that should be corrected.

I would like to begin in a practical way by relating some concrete STM experiences that should give us a context and an overview for further conversation. The examples I will give are based on three different scenarios. The first is of my own experience as a short-term “missionary” sent to Cameroon in Africa for three weeks. In the second case I was no longer a missionary but rather a leader in charge of coordinating ministry tasks of diverse mission groups in differing contexts and places. The last scenario presents me as an educator and motivator, responsible for sending students to the mission field for short periods. This paper centers on personal experiences more than on the theological or biblical basis of short-term missions.

These experiences are based not only on having received mission groups in Peru but also on having sent Peruvian mission groups to other countries or other parts of our country in order to carry out evangelistic ministry. Furthermore, my own personal experience as part of an STM team gives me a broader and more objective view in the final assessment.

The Jesus Film

Although this experience is limited to showing the Jesus film in Cameroon with a group of Canadians, it can be used to assess from an insider’s perspective the situation of those who struggle most to adapt to a new cultural situation. In

1992, I had the chance to participate in an STM project in Cameroon with a group of about as fifty Canadian young people, sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ. We went in teams to different cities, towns, and villages, showing the Jesus film in the native language, which was basically pidgin English.



As a Latin American who probably had more in common with the Africans than my Canadian brothers did, it was not hard for me to adapt. Although the food, customs, language, style of relating, and so on were different, it was harder for the Canadians to adapt to these circumstances which were so different from their own. One of the

most memorable experiences was in Essinbi, a community that we could only reach by helicopter. My cabin mates could not sleep the first night because they were terrified of what might happen to them if they were left at the mercy of the people they called “the cannibals.” It was interesting to note that fear of new things and uncertainty regarding the unknown was stronger than the apparent “call” which had taken them out of Canada to preach the gospel.

Before setting out for that particular location, one young man had said he had a bad premonition about the helicopter trip, and he almost decided not to travel to that community. To some extent this fear is a natural and even necessary part of the enriching experience for the group. However, it also marked a lack of understanding of the reality of the community, due to a lack of training and teaching, because there were no cannibals in that community. In one sense, this experience revealed the fact that something was not

squaring with reality and that the situation could well have been avoided by a more thorough preparation.

Church Partnership Evangelism (CPE)

One of my ministry experiences was with what we called “Church Partnership Evangelism.” Groups, mainly from Canada, went out to different countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America for two or three weeks in order to join with different local churches in carrying out door-to-door evangelistic work.

These groups had gone through prior preparation that included, among other things, teaching them to support the local believer in prayer while he or she carried on the evangelistic conversation. Given that many of the team members could not communicate in the language of the country they were visiting, their task was restricted to prayer. The lack of knowledge of the language, in nearly all instances, was an obstacle to communication. It is worth asking whether it would not be better to invest time in learning a language, at least at a basic level, or perhaps better still, to restrict mission trips only to those believers who know the language of the place they will be visiting.

In CPE, the foreigners were a sort of “bait” when they went out to evangelize with a local, since, according to the organizers, there was greater openness when the local believer was accompanied by missionaries, even more so if the foreigners brought souvenirs from their own country.

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This ministry was not only carried out in Peru, where we received various groups of foreigners, but we were also able to take Peruvians to Paraguay, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Canada itself, where the Peruvians became the “bait” since they were the missionaries.

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Foreign missionaries will inevitably be seen as “bait” because the color of their skin, their accent when speaking the language, or their lack of knowledge of the language draw people’s attention. However, I think we should stop and ask ourselves how valid it is to use the bait factor to open doors to evangelism.

Thus the panorama is two-way: On the one hand missionaries from the north came to our Latin American countries, and on the other hand, Latin Americans traveled to other Latin American countries as missionaries.

Without a doubt, over the years God blessed not only the foreign missionaries, be they Canadians or Peruvians, but also the local churches that were committed to the CPE ministry. I recall the birth of a church in a Paraguayan city that began as a result of the effort of these missionaries who self-sacrificially went out day after day to do door-to-door evangelism.

Furthermore, several young people who had the chance to participate in this ministry felt God calling them to the mission field. At least three young people who are members of our church are ministering today in different parts of the world.

I should add that the funding behind this ministry that had been going on for several years was a man of German descent and Mennonite tradition who had decided to invest

a significant sum of money each year to further it. These funds were later channeled to his own denomination. Laura Montgomery, in talking of medical missions, states, “Not all of these projects originate from organizational leadership. Some are initiated by members of a congregation...” (1993). This comment also applies to STM ventures that do not necessarily focus on the medical aspect. In the case of CPE, a single church member took the initiative to invest and channel resources for door-to-door evangelism to be carried out in various countries.

Mission Training School

My third experience is from the perspective of an educator and motivator in the field of missions. As rector of the Alliance Bible Seminary in Peru, I developed a mission training program aimed primarily at young people. This program not only offered theoretical training but also included a trip within Peru to put into practice what had been learned during the semester.

In this way, we sent STM groups to the Peruvian jungle, the highlands, and other urban centers along the coast. In self-criticism, I must recognize that we could have done more in terms of prior preparation. Several of the young people who went to the jungle were not properly prepared, which led to giving a bad impression especially in relation to food, particularly to the brothers and sisters of tribes that speak other languages. When faced with “suri” (cooked or raw grub worms), some students had a negative reaction that caused a huge breach between the missionaries and the receiving community. This obstacle was so daunting that it was very difficult to restore confidence for subsequent work. I think that if we had trained our students better, those risks would have been reduced. 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.

Conclusion

These experiences lead us to some observations:

1. *The missionaries' great willingness for Christian service was evident.*

On one trip, a group of missionaries that arrived at a given country knew they were there to fulfill a given purpose and that they were not tourists in a foreign land. Prior preparation was fundamental in making the missionaries aware that, although they would only be staying for a short time, they should show complete willingness for Christian service. There were very few cases of obvious annoyance, discomfort, or reluctance on the part of the foreigners in relation to the purpose for which they had come; however, it did occur at times. It is interesting to note that the initial willingness wore off as the days passed, and the time came when the missionaries were thinking more about returning to their own country than about "saving souls." I do not mention this aspect in judgment or criticism but as an understandable reality. There is much talk today of the need to "return to the refuge," that is, to a space where the missionaries can feel closer to their own culture without offending the receiving culture, thus renewing their strength to continue with the task entrusted to them.

2. *Adaptability to the national culture.*

This aspect must be highlighted as positive. In many cases we saw efforts made to fit in to the receiving culture. There were always specific situations that were

not easy to solve, but in most cases the foreigner, the missionary, did everything possible to do the right thing by the local culture. This is probably one of the greater virtues of the STM groups with which I was able to work. It was perhaps due to the knowledge that the stay in the culture would not be prolonged, and with the return home just round the corner, any sacrifice was made less painful. The issue of food required the greatest sacrifice for many, particularly for missionaries from the US or Canada.

3. *Lack of adaptability within the group.*

It is symptomatic that although there was certain flexibility in adapting to the foreign culture, the same could not be said of adapting to the people within the group, from the same country of origin. That is, there was always someone for whom it was more difficult to adapt to fellow countrymen than to the members of the receiving church.

On occasion we witnessed arguments and fights between members of the same team about superficial and insignificant things. It did not happen with every STM trip, but it is startling that it should happen at all. The fighting did not occur only in groups that arrived from the northern hemisphere but also among Peruvians who went to other regions on mission trips.

4. *Respect for the receiving church.*

I mention this aspect because it occurred primarily when there had been prior preparation with the receiving church. That is, 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.

5. *Lack of respect for the group leader.*

Conversely, despite the increased respect for the receiving culture and church, the groups of missionaries did not show the same respect for their own leaders. In some cases there was inattentiveness to the group leader and in others a lack of cooperation that could have made their joint task easier. Oddly, when the leader was a person from a different culture than the mission group, there was greater respect, but when it was someone from the same culture, the problems increased.

This irony also speaks of the lack of preparation and particularly the lack of subsequent assessment, because we occasionally saw people who had caused problems later participating in other mission projects in another country.

Final thoughts

Although I have used personal experience as my launch pad, I think that in most cases, however varied the circumstances, the conclusions and evaluations will be similar.

One of the fundamental questions we must ask is, "What is the motivation of the groups that arrive to do short-term missions?" Are they really conscious of the way money is spent? Is there proper preparation and assessment within the mission groups? The initiatives often come from outside and are not born in the local church. The agenda, then, has been established by outside missionaries, and, in some cases, the national church has no say in the decisions or in

modifying the strategies used in carrying out the mission work. It is necessary to establish a dialog that allows a greater rapprochement between STM groups and local churches.

There is a latent and, in my humble opinion, inevitable danger of “religious tourism” that will happen to the extent that prior preparation and subsequent assessment of STM groups is disregarded. That is, the further we are from serious planning and coordination with local churches, the greater the risk of investing millions of dollars in “religious tourism” that could well be used in more effective ways for establishing the Kingdom. It is no secret that most missionaries these days go to countries where there is already an evangelical witness and many churches. Only a very small number are in places where the witness of Christ has not yet arrived. Unreached people groups cannot be reached by short-term missionaries. Long and permanent commitments are needed in order to reach the 1.8 billion people in the world without Christian witness. In the words of renowned missiologist Ralph Winter, these people cannot be reached by “amateur” missionaries (McQuilkin 2006).



Short-termers sometimes participate in tourist activities. This group is at Laguna Huacachina in Peru, taking a ride in a sand buggy

Similarly, if we are not willing to sit down and seriously evaluate the processes that lead to the development of short-term missions, we are condemned to merely entertaining people and spending money irresponsibly. I am

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not referring to calculating results, which is nearly always done. I am referring to evaluating the processes that lead certain organizations to plan STM trips. As it stands now, evaluation usually focuses on the results, and organizations practically demand positive results that can be numerically expressed and used as effective publicity for future trips.

It is in our hands as Latin Americans to raise our voice and, if necessary, to say, "Stop!" The time has come for us to sit at the negotiating table and establish an agenda together, with foreigners and locals, sending and receiving churches on equal footing, because in the end, we shall all stand before Christ's throne to glorify his name together. There will be no differences of any kind, because before the Lord we will all equally be recipients of his love and goodness.

May it never again be said in words and even less in deeds, "We are better because we come from this or that country."

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