

# Short-Term Missions: What Can Be Rescued, What Can Be Criticized, and the Challenge of Contextualization

Tito Paredes

## Introduction

The present volume, an innovative contribution to the missiological literature in Spanish, tries to explain a phenomenon that has gone unnoticed in literature and in missiological reflection: the phenomenon of short-term

---

Tito Paredes (PhD, anthropology, UCLA; MDiv, Fuller Theological Seminary) is the director of the Orlando E. Costas Graduate School of Mission in Lima, Peru. He is also a professor of cross-cultural communications for PRODOLA (Latin American Doctoral Program) of the *Universidad Evangelica de las Americas* of Costa Rica. He has published two books, *El evangelio en platos de barro* and *Con permiso para danzar*, and numerous articles in Spanish and English.



missions (STM). As many authors in this journal have already mentioned, this is a movement of great magnitude that mobilizes not only millions of dollars but also millions of people around the world. **Latin America takes part in this phenomenon, mainly as receptor and host.**

---

*Latin America takes part in the phenomenon of STM mainly as receptor and host.*

---

Historian Eliseo Vílchez tries to help us see the phenomenon of STM within the context of globalization and post-modernity. For Vílchez, the importance of STM

is the result of the transformations we are living through, that are also affecting the traditional forms of ecclesiastic and missionary endeavor, spilling over into new forms of church and mission in keeping with disenchanted or late modernism. In that perspective, STMs reveal a new subject and agent of mission that is characterized by a pluralization of models and forms of service; by a multiplicity of exchanges of symbolic and material goods and networks that are outside the formal and traditional circuits; by the huge economic potential it represents, which encourages agencies to market STM packages and mission agencies that have seen it as a means of subsistence; by its highly subjective, emotional, playful, and esthetic spirituality, if we observe STMs that offer mainly concerts and high profile events... Thus, in the context of religious globalization, STMs arise as one of the strongest instruments of contemporary mission and of the religious transformation that the whole world is experiencing.

Our co-editor in this volume, Robert Priest, besides motivating us to become interested in the research and reflection of short-term missions from Latin America, from

Short-Term Missions:  
What Can Be Rescued, What Can Be Criticized,  
and the Challenge of Contextualization

those who receive the STM, is concerned lest neocolonialist attitudes and multiple errors be repeated in the cross-cultural missionary task. At the conference he argued, on the contrary, that more just relationships be promoted empowering Christians and local churches from the third world:

But if we US Americans do not want to promote ways of neocolonialism and continue to be blind, we also need to listen to the Latin American missiological voices. How can we live our common lives of witnessing and faith in a more faithful manner, in societies that involve wise and sustained intercultural relations, an adequate administration of God's resources, and that empower Christians to insure in the best way the results of the long-term ministry?

This volume is a remarkable effort and is pioneer in that direction.

In the different essays shared in this work on STM experiences we have seen a range of practices that go from an ethnocentric, neocolonialist, and culturally insensitive attitude that imposes the agenda on the local group, to a

The International Conference  
on Short-Term Mission,  
held in Lima, Peru,  
provided scholars, pastors,  
and the laity the chance to  
dialogue about short-term  
missions and Latin America

Here, Tito Paredes  
converses with  
Jules Martinez, a Puerto  
Rican pastor studying at Trinity  
Evangelical Divinity School



more cooperative attitude of service and cultural sensibility that asks the local church to elaborate the agenda so the visitors can adapt themselves to it and put themselves at its service. In between these two poles are many shades of attitudes and practices. Hunter Farrell referred to these poles as either STM “paratroopers” or as a much more profound encounter like what happened between Jesus and Zacchaeus.

By way of summary and conclusion, in the remainder of this article I would like to point out some of the most notable aspects of the articles presented herein. For that purpose we will use an outline referring to the positive aspects and what can be rescued from STM; what can be criticized; and then what needs to be corrected to finally conclude with some recommendations and final reflections.

### **What Can Be Rescued from STM**

According to Arroyo:

To designate these short-term trips as “mission” is a mistake, a distortion of the very nature of the mission of God and the mission of the church.

In his experience as an STM receptor church he says that at first their encounters with STM were vertical in character, where the receiving church was passive and simply carried out the objectives and goals of the visitors.

As time passed there were more frequent encounters, and the leaders of the receiving church grew in missiological reflection and maturity, correcting the situation to carry on a practice from the local’s church agenda. This relationship between STM sender and receiver churches grew, permitting an experience of collaboration and co-participation. Thus the encounters and relationships with the short-term

missionaries became more symmetrical and just. The experience from the model of a two-way cooperation, founded on a missiology that seeks the incarnation as the model of mission, became the way for more fruitful relationships and missionary practices that bless both those who come and those who stay.

Rodrigo Maslucán, in his experience with STM, coincides with Marcos Arroyo in having experienced situations of imposition of agendas, the negative influence of money, and the local church not being taken into consideration, resulting in a disastrous outcome of division! On the other hand, like Arroyo, he sees that there can be mutual benefit and blessing if there is good co-ordination and cultural sensibility. Maslucán concludes that

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.

Possibly the most different, but none the less successful, STM experience was the one described by Joaquín Alegre from the province of Callao, near Lima, Peru. In this case we have an example of the local church as the protagonist who establishes the agenda, and there is planning and communication by both senders and receivers. Furthermore, in spite of the large number of STM participants, the trip was very fruitful, and the local church's goals were achieved!

Joaquín's enthusiasm for this experience, less of an event and more like a movement, is such that he concludes by saying:

All I have left to say is to echo the Psalmist: "The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118.23).

Alegre describes a case of STM that is closer to an enriching experience for both sides. Their model points to a long-term growing experience that includes contextualization and is based on a solid missiological and biblical foundation. Alegre summarizes the evaluation of the experience in the following lines:

Evaluation of the Short-Term Mission Trip

- A. It was a great blessing!
- B. We reached almost 100% of our goals.
- C. Working side by side was good.
- D. It turned into a big problem that the interpreters were an isolated group.
- E. We made a big impact on the community.
- F. We did not water down the message.
- G. The impact on the people from [the visiting church] was substantial.

Recommendations for a Short-Term Missions Trip

- A. The interpreters must be trained at the host church.
- B. It is important for the host church to develop the agenda.
- C. The evangelistic message should not lower the requirements of the gospel.
- D. The host church should help the visiting church understand its culture.
- E. Both churches must make a movement out of the encounter rather than viewing it simply as an event.

**Short-Term Missions Also:**

1. Provide the possibility for an intercultural encounter and for learning about cultures and Christian experiences from both sides (cf. Sallandt's concepts of getting to know "the other" who is different and of a "hermeneutics of the unknown").
2. Help us remember that we are part of the kingdom of God at a global level with a linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and social diversity and that we are related by Christ's grace and mercy. Marcos Arroyo referred to ecclesiology as indispensable for mission and to mission as indispensable for the church.
3. Can help us understand the gospel in a more complete way and help us recognize that we are part of the body of Christ. We need to learn to live relating with each other as one and as equal before God—yet at the same time, aware that we perform different functions and that we have different gifts! The cultural differences can be a blessing.
4. Must demonstrate the visiting group's effort to include the socio-cultural and ethnic diversity of the country from which they come (STM should include people from every nation, Revelation 7.9-10).
5. Can be seen as part of the process of preparation and training for God's global mission. As our brother Samuel Escobar noted at the conference, STM can be part of the pedagogical dimension for mission. We cannot expect a significant contextualization of the STM experiences, but we can see them as part of the process of preparation for a more contextual mission in or out of our cultural context.



Sociologist Kurt Ver Beek and Samuel Escobar both participated in the International Conference on Short-Term Mission in Lima, Peru

6. Must make an effort to fit into the paradigm of the gospel's contextualization being inherent to mission. This paradigm implies that cross-cultural training of the participants is an ineludible condition of their activity in the mission. At the same time, it is crucial to accept the fact that the local church (the national church or the Christians from the place where the STM teams are heading) must be the significant actor with whom and under whom STM teams must be ready to dialogue and work.

### **What Can Be Criticized about STM**

1. Ethnocentric and imperialist attitudes that are manifested not only in the visitors' indifference towards and ignorance of the local culture but also in contempt towards it. Though extreme, such cases do occur, and we must not be blind to them.
2. When STM teams come with an already-established agenda which they impose according to the interests



of their churches, context, and culture without dialoging, communicating, and planning with the churches that are being visited.

3. When STM trips become an excuse to do tourism, even “religious tourism!”
4. When resources and money are used to manipulate and buy people (frequently done unconsciously and without cruel intentions).
5. When there is no clear vision of the whole gospel, which needs to be lived taking into account the entire context, starting from the context from where the STM participants come.
6. Lack of biblical and contextual training.

---

*The gospel will  
always be a  
pilgrim in every  
culture since it  
will confront the  
sinful and  
opposing elements  
in it.*

---

### **The Challenge of Contextualization in Short-Term Missions**

One of the central themes of missiology, better yet, of the church’s mission, is contextualization. By this term we understand the possibility and capability of Christians in a determined context to make the gospel feel at home in the cultures where people live and communicate God’s Word; but at the same time, to take into account that the gospel will always be a pilgrim in every culture since it will confront the sinful and opposing elements in it. To be part of the culture, but at the same time not fully part of it, is the tension in which Christians throughout the world live. It is the wider context in which we live and where the mission of God is communicated in the world. It follows that STM cannot evade this fact.

Contextualization by nature implies a lifelong commitment and the intention of long-term work even when sacrifice is needed. Christ's incarnation and enculturation is the paradigmatic model of mission: the way in which Jesus communicated his message in the Jewish culture, his relationships with different people of diverse gender, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. His is an important example to follow if we desire to be faithful to the gospel and consistent with the context in which we live.

This faithfulness implies, in the case of those who cross cultural frontiers, resigning the familiar and perhaps comfortable lifestyle of their own culture.

Contextualization can become mere accommodation, acculturation, domestication, and absorption of the gospel, like in syncretism or in religion-culture. The relationship between gospel and culture must be dynamic and dialectic, like the seed that grows, taking from the ground and selecting the nutritive elements that are compatible with the plant's life, without losing its own nature. Jesus says that the gospel is also like yeast in dough, like the salt on the earth, like new wine. Therefore, there is an explosive, renewing, subversive, revolutionary power in it. That is why true contextualization also implies confrontation. (Arias, n.d.)

One of the big challenges of doing mission in any context and, even more, of cross-cultural mission is the process of contextualization. STM cannot escape this challenge. If contextualization is one of the parameters of a mission that is effective and faithful to the gospel, then STM must to consider it in its approach, preparation, objectives, and goals. Will it be possible to take the challenge of contextualization in STM seriously? If so, contextualization, according to Jesus'

model, must start at home. As has already been said, it must be part of a more permanent and ample project: that is, the *Misio Dei*, God's mission in Jesus Christ in relationship with his creation and with every human being.

God's holistic mission encompasses the whole gospel, in and from the context of the questions of STM towards a more global, multicultural, socio-economic, and multilinguistic context of God's world. This vision must be incorporated in STM, attending every human being within his or her local and global society.

---

#### REFERENCES

Arias, Mortimer. n.d. *Evangelización contextual en América Latina: Entre la acomodación y la confrontación*. No. 79, Publicaciones Apoyo, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.