

Introduction: Short-Term Missions and the Latin American Church

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Churches in the United States are going through a major paradigm shift in terms of involvement in global mission, with short-term mission (STM) trips becoming more and more the norm. While the number of career missionaries appears to be dropping (Weber and Welliver 2007, 13), the number of short-term missionaries is dramatically increasing. Robert Wuthnow, a prominent sociologist of religion, has recently reported (personal email, March 13, 2006) that in 2005, 2.1% of church members in the United States traveled abroad on short-term mission trips. Many larger churches now send out dozens, or even hundreds, of short-term missionaries every year. A good number of these churches have a person on the pastoral staff, a missions pastor, whose job it is to plan and organize these trips. Youth pastors, who used to take youth on an annual retreat to a conference center or camp, are now expected to take their youth group

on an annual missions trip—either to somewhere else in the United States such as West Virginia or New Orleans, or to some other country like Mexico, the Dominican Republic, or Peru. Hundreds of organizations now exist to help youth pastors organize and coordinate such trips. In my own survey of Christian university and seminary students in the US (number surveyed: 5270), I found that more than 50% had traveled abroad on one or more short-term mission trips. The following graph represents a breakdown of their answers in terms of number of trips taken:

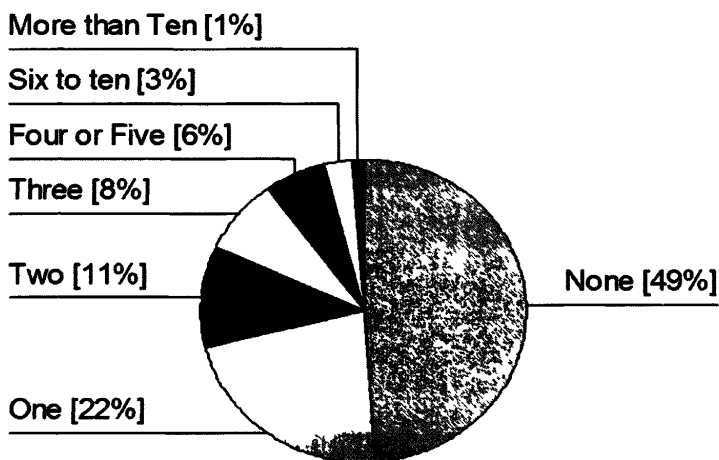


Figure 1:
Number of Short-Term Mission Trips Taken Outside the USA

Fifty-one percent of these students had traveled abroad on at least one mission trip. Ten percent had taken four or more short-term mission trips abroad.

These trips are relatively brief; more than two-thirds of the trips lasted two weeks or less:

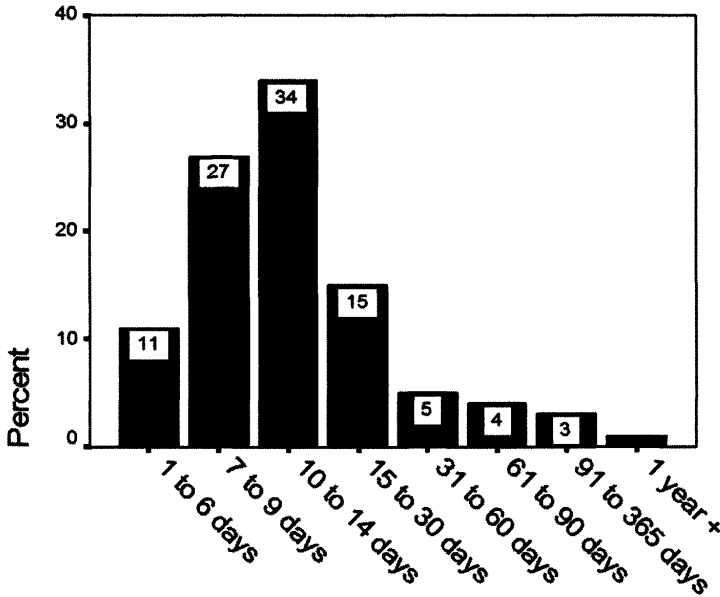


Figure 2:
Length of Most Recent Short-Term Mission Trip Abroad

In short, over a million US church members traveled abroad in 2005 on short-term mission trips lasting fourteen days or less.

What do these short-term missionaries do? They teach English, provide medical care, hand out clothes or eye-glasses, help with construction, teach children Bible lessons, hold evangelistic outreaches, paint, perform dramas, organize sports camps, share their testimonies, hold workshops, sing, help feed the poor, lobby for justice,

participate in evangelistic circuses, shop, and perhaps visit Machu Picchu or the beach.

At my own seminary, as with most other US seminaries, over half of our seminary students have traveled abroad on short-term mission trips. But until recently, nothing in our curriculum, nothing that we taught, was designed to help our students wisely lead and participate in these trips. Students might, for example, be studying with us in order to become youth pastors, where their job description will require them to lead such trips. But we as faculty were not doing anything to help them understand ministry within the framework of this new paradigm. I am one of six missiologists on our seminary's faculty. I think it is safe to say that until recently, all of us, like missiologists at most seminaries, focused our

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efforts on helping to train and prepare career missionaries, with little attention paid to short-term missions—other than to make an occasional negative comment about it. Missiologists have not studied or reflected on wise ministry within this new paradigm, and leaders within the short-term mission movement have not valued theological, missiological, or anthropological understandings.

But recently a number of missiologists and other scholars in the United States have been working to do research and have been writing on the subject of short-term missions in order to bridge the gulf between the seminary and the field, between missiologists and practitioners. While the amount

of quality literature on the topic is still relatively small, it is growing in extent and quality. The topic is important for churches in the United States.

It is also an important topic for Latin American churches, not least for the simple reason that over half of all short-term mission trips from the United States go to somewhere in Latin America.¹ Somewhere in the neighborhood of 800,000 US Christians travel annually to somewhere in Latin America to work with Latin American Christians in some sort of collaborative short-term ministry. The nature of these new patterns of collaborative ministry merits careful attention. It is important that our assessments of these partnerships be done not just from the North, but from the South. In a 2006 survey of Peruvian evangelical pastors (mostly from Lima and its surroundings), a majority of pastors (55%) say they had personally worked closely at some time or other with a visiting group of short-term missionaries from another country. A clear majority (58%) state that their church had hosted a visiting short-term mission group from abroad during their current pastorate. Furthermore, 52% of the pastors report that members from their own congregations likewise go on short-term mission trips—some to small towns in the mountains of Peru, others to Indian villages in the rainforest. A very few even travel abroad joining an international team of short-term missionaries (see for example the article in this issue by Cerrón).

In any case, the topic of short-term missions is directly relevant to Latin American Christian leaders, who are connected in one way or another to this phenomenon. Just

¹ This information is based on a survey of 5270 seminary and college students, who have jointly gone abroad on 6286 short-term mission trips. Over half were to somewhere in Latin America.

as seminary professors, missiologists, and pastors in the United States need to pay more attention to this new set of ministry practices, so also Latin American pastoral and missiological leaders need to carefully think through these realities in relation to Latin American experiences and perspectives. When US Americans have studied short-term missions, we have done so with a focus on the experiences of the US American participants rather than on the experiences of host communities. We have tended to focus on outcomes in the lives of those who travel rather than on outcomes in the lives of host community members. And we have tended to treat the short-term travelers as the central agents in these ministry practices—rather than the host country Christians as central actors and agents in these collaborative ventures. This narrow focus represents a serious weakness in the analysis.

In the summer of 2005 I had the privilege of co-leading a graduate seminar in Lima, Peru with Dr. Tito Paredes focused on research methods. With the students, who were



Participants in the short-term mission conference held at the Seminario Evangelico de Lima

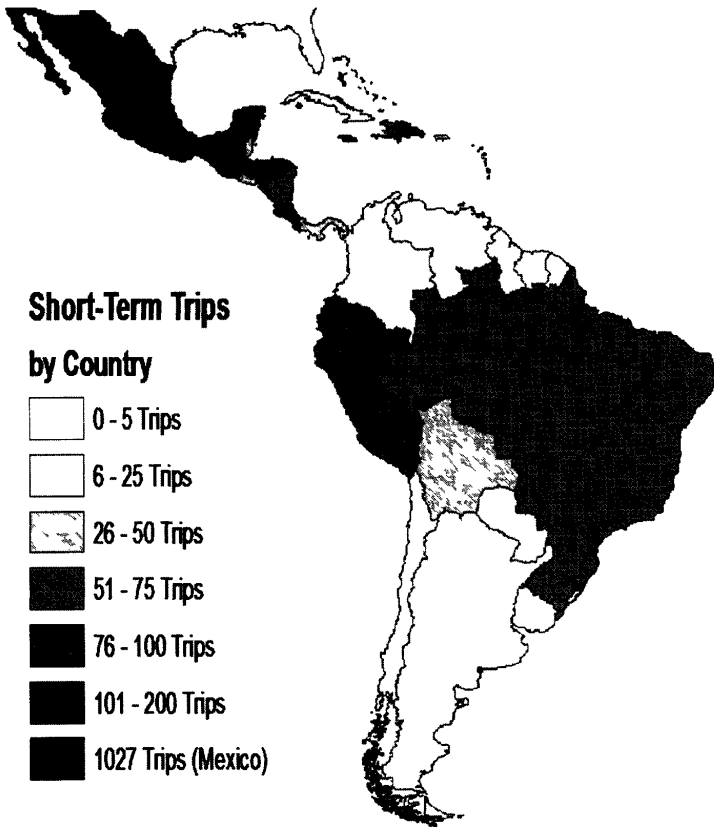
themselves seminary professors and ecclesiastical leaders, and with ATS-Lilly funding, we formed a research team which carried out participant observation in settings where visiting STM teams were at work and which interviewed several dozen Peruvians who work extensively in collaboration with visiting STM teams. Again and again the data seemed to suggest that the projects with maximum impact were those in which Peruvian partners were central to the planning and implementation of the collaborative projects, in which the projects fit within the long-term strategy and plans of host country Christians, and in which there was energy and commitment to the project on both sides. While 800,000 US American Christians travel to Latin America every year on short-term mission service projects—in all likelihood expending over a billion dollars in the process—many tens or hundreds of thousands of Christians in Latin America are actively entering into collaborative projects with these visitors. The host country Christians are often key to long-term successful ministry outcomes.

Consequently, under the leadership of Dr. Tito Paredes and myself, but with the enthusiastic support of others on our original research team (including contributors to this volume Rodrigo Maslucán, Eliseo Vílchez-Blancas, and Ulrike Sallandt), we explored the possibility of organizing an international conference in Spanish on short-term missions to be held in Lima, Peru and with the focus on Latin American perspectives and experiences with short-term missions. With funding from the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, we were able to hold a three-day conference (August 2-4, 2006) under the primary sponsorship of the Facultad Evangélica Orlando E. Costas and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and co-sponsored by the

Concilio Nacional Evangélico del Perú, the Facultad Teológica Latinoamericana Alianza (FATELA), the Instituto Bíblico de Lima, and the Seminario Evangélico de Lima—which is where the conference met. Presenters came from Spain, Honduras, Canada, Paraguay, the United States, and Peru. While a majority of the presenters were Latin American, there were a number of US American presenters with long-term ties to Latin America. Dr. Tite Tiénou, the academic dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, himself born in Africa, spoke on a theology of partnership. Dr. Miguel Ángel Palomino led in worship; Dr. Samuel Escobar served as discussant; and Dr. Tito Paredes served as master of ceremonies. The conference was well-attended and generated a great deal of energy and interaction.

Subsequent to the conference, many of the presenters were asked to revise their papers in the light of other presentations and prepare them for publication in this journal. It is believed that North American Christians need to hear the voices of Latin American Christian leaders on the topic of short-term missions. This edition will be the first time that such a publication allows for cross-continental dialogue on this topic.

The following map shows the countries of Latin America which receive the highest concentrations of short-term missionaries from the USA, based on a survey of 5270 college and seminary students. While Mexico receives by far the highest numbers of short-term missionaries, Peru itself appears to be the largest recipient of short-term missionaries in South America. Lima, then, represented an appropriate setting for this conference.



**Figure 3:
Latin American Destinations of US-Origin Short-Term
Missionaries**

This theme issue begins with an article by Dr. Francisco Cerrón, who discusses his experiences over the years: first with visiting US American short-termers, second with his own STM trip to Cameroon with a group of Canadians, third

in his role with Church Partnership Evangelism in which he supervised many STM groups in Latin America, and finally in his role as rector of the *Seminario Bíblico Alianza del Perú*, sharing the experiences of students his school has sent out on STM trips within Peru. His paper discusses issues of cultural adjustment, respect for indigenous leadership, stewardship, and the need for a collaborative discussion by Christians from North and South about missiologically-wise involvements with short-term missions.

The second article, by Dr. Martín Hartwig Eitzen, director of the Instituto Bíblico Asunción, indicates that in Paraguay the concept of short-term missions is less well-known (which one would expect from the map above). Yet in the last fifteen years STM groups have come to Paraguay from abroad. He specifically looks at Disciple Making International (closely modeled on Church Partnership Evangelism as discussed by Cerrón), an organization which not only brings North Americans to Paraguay, but also helps cover the cost of Paraguayan seminary students traveling abroad on their own STM trips. Of the Paraguayan seminary students Eitzen surveyed, 53% had participated in STM projects themselves. At the time of our conference in Lima, Martín Eitzen was accompanying a group of Paraguayan seminary students to Peru on their own STM trip. Eitzen's paper reports on his survey of Paraguayan seminary students and discussions with Paraguayan pastors, and it suggests that STM trips help forge substantive and significant relationships.

The third article focuses on the organization Church Partnership Evangelism (CPE), whose paradigm for ministry is discussed in the preceding two articles. Dr. Charles Cook (himself a missionary kid who grew up in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru and currently a missiology professor who formerly served as a missionary in Bolivia and Mexico) is the founder

of Church Partnership Evangelism, and Joel Van Hoogen is its current director. This article attempts to articulate their vision and strategy and to respond to critiques.

The fourth article by Dr. Hunter Farrell, a Presbyterian (PCUSA) missionary and anthropologist in Peru, sets forth the model of STM used by the Joining Hands Network of Peru—where Peruvian and US Christians network collaboratively to engage in economic development, human rights, and care of God's creation. He contrasts "paratrooper incursions" of short-termers with what his organization strives after— "Zaccheus encounters," where wealthy US Americans meet Jesus in an encounter which confronts them with their obligations to poor and oppressed peoples. He examines a case study where a single congregation in Ohio developed long-term commitments to Peru, specifically to helping make a difference in the mining town of La Oroya where pollution by a US American company had contributed



Panel discussion at the International Conference on Short-Term Mission,
Lima, Peru , August 2-4, 2006

to lead poisoning in most of the town's children. The story of how this church (and others) was able to work closely with Peruvians for change is a dramatic story, told both in this paper and in a recent *Christianity Today* article (April 2007, p. 70). Farrell's writing shows how the collaborative partnership formed through a certain type of STM trips was able to accomplish important goals.

In the fifth paper, the medical anthropologist Dr. Laura Montgomery, based on her extensive research on short-term missions, raises critical questions about the ways in which short-term medical missions are currently practiced. She suggests that the value of such medical missions, assessed purely in terms of their medical contribution to human health, are all too often ineffective and characterized by poor stewardship.

In the sixth article, Dr. Apolos Landa, himself a medical doctor with the Luke Society—which facilitates community health development throughout Latin America (and elsewhere)—discusses from his own experience typical problems associated with short-term medical missions. He provides not only an incisive critique of short-term medical missions as currently practiced but also sets forth specific principles which such medical missions must adopt and follow if they are to truly contribute to appropriate rural health development.

In the seventh article, Joaquín Alegre, a Christian and Missionary Alliance pastor in Callao, Peru provides a descriptive report on the church-to-church partnership which his congregation shares with a sister congregation in the USA. He reports on the most recent visit of nearly 200 members from this US congregation for a collaborative outreach venture, one which resulted in increased visibility and respect for his church in Callao and in significant church

growth. He discusses lessons learned and principles to be followed in such collaborative outreach and service ventures.

In the eighth article, Rodrigo Maslucán (a Presbyterian minister and denominational leader), grounded in extensive research and experience, discusses problems and challenges which his churches have faced when working collaboratively with US American STM groups. He provides criticism as well as constructive suggestions for how such collaborative ventures could be improved.

In the ninth article, Eliseo Vílchez-Blancas, church historian and rector of the Instituto Bíblico de Lima, nicely situates short-term missions within broader historical patterns related to globalization and postmodernity, raising important issues related to these new patterns of missionary activity.

In the tenth article, Dr. Robert Priest provides an analysis of STM as contributing to "linking social capital," as building strategic links between North and South, links that are important to Protestant churches in Peru—even as they are sometimes exercised in unhealthy or neocolonialistic ways.

In the eleventh article, Dr. Ulrike Sallandt, a German theologian married to a Peruvian and who has adopted Peru as her new home, focuses on the hermeneutics of an intercultural encounter in short-term missions, an encounter in which women from Europe or North America and women from Latin America encounter each other, learn to rethink the ways in which gender is framed by their churches and readings of Scripture, and each come to new appreciations and understandings through this encounter.

Next, Dr. Miguel Ángel Palomino, a missiologist and mission historian (as well as director of FATELA) provides a masterful theological, historical, and missiological reflection on changes in paradigms of mission exemplified by short-term missions.

In the thirteenth paper, Marcos Arroyo Bahamonde, a missiologist and pastor of a congregation in Cerro de Pasco, Peru, writes from his own experience working with STM groups from France, Sweden, England, and North America. He writes out of Latin American missiological and theological concerns for the ways in which STM as currently practiced distorts a balanced understanding of mission. He sets forth principles that ought to be followed in any collaborative STM project.

And finally, Dr. Tito Paredes provides his own conclusion and analysis. We hope that this set of articles will make a strategic contribution and will be widely read by Christian leaders from English-speaking regions of the world who are entering into collaborative projects (using short-term mission trips) with fellow Christians in Latin America. We must listen to the voices of those with whom we collaborate.

REFERENCES

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