

Toward Better Short-Term Missions, Darren Carlson|10:00 PM CT

It is easy to be critical. I was once listening to a teacher from a European country lecture at a U.S. seminary on the evils of short-term missions. It was a highly critical lecture (with which I largely agreed), but there was no direction for what was appropriate in short-term missions. I don't think he realized that he was actually participating in what I would classify as a short-term missions trip---a full-time intensive visit to another culture for a focused time of vocational ministry.



In the [first article](#) I laid out the history of short-term missions and some of the opportunities it has provided. The [second article](#) pointed to some of the problems that surround the enterprise. Now I want to offer a way forward.

Change the Name

This may be a personal preference, but I think it would be helpful to rename "short-term missions" and instead call it "short-term ministry." I believe the title of missionary should be reserved for those committed to being in another culture for longer than a year. So we all live on mission in the context where God has placed us, and when we leave that context for a short period of time for a focused time of ministry, we are participating in short-term ministry. When we serve in another culture we then should call it "Short-Term Cross-Cultural Ministry."

Short-Term Cross-Cultural Ministry Should Be an Extension of Local Ministry

At this risk of stating the obvious, your short-term cross-cultural ministry should be an extension of your local ministry. If you have thousands of Hispanics in your surrounding area, but only interact with Hispanics when you send a short-term team to Mexico, your local mission has a hole in it. There is a high concentration of Somali Muslims living near my church. Before our church considers sending short-term teams to Somalia to reach out to Muslims, it should first consider how to serve and reach the neighbors God has brought to us. It feels like the [Great Commission in reverse](#). Local ministry and short-

term cross-cultural ministry should not be in competition; rather, both should be part your church's vision.

Ask the Missionaries

To protect against doing unintentional harm, go directly to the missionaries your church supports and trusts to find out whether they would like a team to come and partner with them. These missionaries can also provide helpful [feedback](#) that comes from experience and understanding. Just make sure they feel the freedom to say no and dictate the details of the trip, such as how many people should come. I know of a missionary who asked for eight people, and the church responded by sending more than 100 youth. We need to listen! Some of the best short-term trips involve just two or three key friends sent by the church to visit a missionary in difficult place. If your church doesn't support long-term missionaries, I would suggest doing so before you consider short-term cross-cultural ministry.

Focus on Long-Term Partnerships with Local Churches

The next step is to work primarily through local churches with a long view in mind. When your short-term ministry team leaves a particular setting, Christians will still live and work where you visited. Your desire should be to serve at the request of and under local church leadership. Your disposition should be one of a learner, with the humility to take your cues from national leaders. You need to be careful, especially when dealing with money. But if you can build a level of trust, the most effective trips will be extensions of another church's ministry. This might lead to bringing fewer team members but result in much more effective ministry.

For example, a church in India has an orphanage, a pastor-training school, and a history of church planting in unreached villages. They don't need teams of people to do projects they already know how to do. They need funds. I am familiar with [this ministry](#), and the pastor who runs it is a good friend. Small teams have traveled there to assess these needs. With the help of a few churches and organizations providing strategic funding they have housing for the children (that the ministry in India built with people they employed), a place to train their pastors, and a sponsorship program to help a trained pastor plant a church in unreached areas. If you wonder how you could sponsor pastors in ways that do not lead to unhealthy dependence, [read these helpful articles](#).

So instead of spending \$30,000 for 10 people to build and paint buildings, we spend a third of the money exploring a long-term partnership and the rest providing work for the Indian people and long-term support for the ministry. If a similar scenario presented itself in parts of Africa, I would be much more cautious. But with this very specific situation, long-term partnership allows both parties to mutually benefit in ways that I believe honor God on the gospel.

Move Away from Relief When Appropriate

One of the problems with short-term missions is that we are stuck in relief work. We paint and build houses, hold babies, and give presents. We do this because almost anyone in our churches can get involved. This type of work makes us feel good but sometimes harms people. Relief is appropriate for short periods, but if you want to get involved in alleviating physical poverty and use that platform to share the gospel and relieve spiritual poverty, you must move toward development work. It's harder, takes longer, but is certainly a better form of mercy and justice ministry.

Really Prepare

You can save yourself and others a lot pain if your team has a capable leader who truly disciples those being sent out from your church. If the primary purpose of your trip is to change the people you send, I think it would be best to stay home. Notice---I say primary! All of life is a call to make disciples, and that includes the people in your church. Sending them out to another culture certainly can be a part of the discipleship process (at least it can be in the West).

At my home church, there is a one-year commitment to being on a short-term ministry team. The time includes a lot of preparation and prayer before going as well as follow-up at the end of the trip. Each team member must have a certain level of competency when it comes to understanding cross-cultural ministry. The church also evaluates each setting afterwards, so that if they feel they are doing something a local church they visit can and should do, they stop sending teams.

Think of Your Trip Through the Grid of Helpful Resources

There are a number of very helpful resources to aid you in thinking through a short-term trip. I will list two here so you can follow up with your own research.

[Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Missions](#)

1. God-Centeredness
2. Empowering Partnerships
3. Mutual Design
4. Comprehensive Administration
5. Qualified Leadership
6. Appropriate Training
7. Thorough Follow-Up

[Toxic Charity](#)

1. Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.
2. Limit one-way giving to emergency situations.
3. Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements.

4. Subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served.
5. Listen closely to those who seek to help, especially to what is not being said--- unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service.
6. Above all, do no harm.

Word to Pastors

Most short-term ministry participants raise support on their own from people outside their local church. So the only way to funnel generosity in the right direction is for pastors to talk about this from the pulpit. Pastors---in your application of Scripture as it relates to discipleship, missions, mercy and justice issues, evangelism, and money, speak to your congregation about short-term missions. Lead your elders and the people God has entrusted to you.

Please get involved in [theological famine relief](#). The [organization](#) I work for is constantly looking for pastors we can mentor and send to train pastors around the world with little or no access to theological education.

Final Word to All

There is a tendency in my circles to try and get everything right, to discuss every scenario, to examine every possible pitfall, and in our preparation bring every person through a process that feels like boot camp. But the beauty of gospel ministry is that God is not handcuffed by our foolishness. He is still accomplishing his purposes amongst the nations. For any harm we may cause, God is using others to bring great advances for the gospel.

So become a thoughtful global Christian. Think critically about cross-cultural engagement. Be convicted if you are harming the church in other cultures. But know that in the end, God is still on his throne, and his work will be accomplished.