

Missions to Mexico

Training Resources

Missionary Forays

An Analysis of Short Term Missions

by Glenn J. Schwartz

Increasing interest in cross-cultural missionary work is producing a new interest in short-term missionary service.

For purposes of this article I have divided short-term visits to the mission field into two categories: very short visits of two to six weeks by those who are taking a working or non-working vacation; and longer visits of six months to two or three years. The longer ones are most often taken by young volunteers, professionals on sabbatical or retired persons willing to give a year or two of service. The major emphasis of this article will be on the shorter visits of two to six weeks.

The effectiveness of short term workers has been written about in various missionary publications in recent years. The purpose of this article is to raise a few questions about the effects of short term service both on the part of the participant as well as the local community in which they participate.

At the outset it should be stated with certainty that short term workers can have a positive experience and at the same time make a positive impact on the community to which they go. The fact that some have counterproductive experiences or are ineffective is my reason for drawing attention to the subject.

I have observed several incidents over the past number of years in which the effect has been negative. I will also later relate some of the more positive experiences with which I am familiar.

In the middle 1960's there was a program that sent well-meaning university students on six-week trips to Africa "to assist in a humanitarian project" that would "build goodwill between the youth of two nations."

On one occasion such a group came to the city in Central Africa where I served as a missionary. After about four weeks into the six week tour the group suddenly left. I heard about their premature departure and went to the building site to ask what had happened. Since they were Americans, as I was, I thought it was important to learn what happened. I was given the following story told by a local builder who was to oversee the project.

"What these Americans forget is that we here in Africa also know how to build buildings. Mind you, they work hard. We have no problem with that. The trowel was too slow in putting mortar between the bricks and so they used their bare hands to speed things up. But they must remember that we have built buildings long before they came and we'll build them after they leave . . . Finally things got so bad we had to ask them to leave. . . "

Obviously the visit was counter-productive in "building goodwill between the youth of two nations."

Ironically, when I visited the site some months later after the building was complete, there was a bronze plaque at the entrance saying that this building was built by the youth of Rhodesia, the United States and Canada to foster goodwill between the nations.

In a second incident, a group of church people participated in erecting a school building in a developing country in West Africa. A struggling national church accepted their offer to do manual labor in order to help complete the project. The group moved in and worked daily under the direction of one of their own members - a building contractor who had gone along with them from the United States. In this case, the local builder stepped back as this "experienced" contractor gave everyone orders each morning on what should be done.

When the group left, all the Americans had a good feeling of "what we did for them." It is true that a building (or partial building) was left behind. It is now several years later and I have interviewed a number of the Americans that participated. It is not surprising that some of them look back with a rather dubious feeling about their contribution. One is so embarrassed about the arrogance they displayed that the suggestion of another "foray" (this time to Asia) is almost repulsive.

It was hoped that this experience would be a wholesome spiritual exercise for the benefit of both the givers and the receivers. The result was negative - in this case upon the participants from North America. Some rightly decided not to participate in another similar foray.

Let me suggest several reasons behind these negative experiences.

One is that the anticipation of doing good for someone else is sometimes overplayed. Americans have a penchant for helping "poor benighted natives" wherever they exist. Sometimes these Americans are seeking to fulfill a felt need for cleanliness or maybe a certain kind of shelter based on their own idea of the same. That felt need is not always shared by those they perceive to be "benighted."

I learned once of some missionaries to Native Americans in the southwestern United States who insisted on rilling a well so that the local people could draw water without going to the river. The local people used the well for several months to show appreciation for what the missionaries had done. However, eventually they abandoned it. It was clearly not a felt need of the local people. Is anyone in the market for a slightly used borehole?

Secondly, the attitude that an "outsider" can do the job better is simply American (or European). This bit of arrogance has been taught to us ever since we can remember. It is only in the last decade or two that we have begun to realize that Japan builds an automobile in less than 10 hours. It takes Detroit over 31 hours to build the average American car!

A third reason for the often negative response is that it is assumed that when we as westerners go somewhere, such as a mission field, we must do something. The world has so many needs that we just must help by "doing."

It is true that we must help with the tremendous needs of a hungry, dying world. What has not struck us is that we must find a way to help that does not leave others feeling that they are too weak, helpless and uninformed to help themselves.

For example, what would happen if a group of Western Christians were to enter a society humbly and be willing to learn and work under the direction of a local contractor who has experience in local ways of building. What if, instead of employing some local people to help the westerners build the building, they gave up all rights to employ anyone and themselves, as volunteers, became humble "employees"?

This could well be the first time that people in this community would meet a westerner with a willingness to learn and serve under someone else's direction. If this were to happen, I believe that when the visitors left, members of the local community would stand amazed and disbelieving. "Surely these were not ordinary westerners, for they learned from us and did not insist that we accept even one new idea from them."

I believe that church and mission societies could learn something from the larger international civic organizations. I attended a meeting of a local civic club some time ago. The speaker of the evening gave a slide presentation on his six-week trip to India in a youth exchange program. (He was a "youth" of 35 years of age, owner of a substantial farming operation in the United States.)

Several things impressed me as he spoke. First of all, he did not say one negative word about the culture or how things were done in India. He did not tell how terrible the food was nor what hygienic conditions were like. Rather he spoke positively about visits to factories, farms and communities. He also spoke positively about his reception into the homes of host families.

I came away shaking my head. How could a secular organization send out a group of six or seven Americans who would come back with such a good experience and a wholesome report?

First of all, this group went specifically to learn. They were not expected to tell how it was done in America. They were told to learn how things were done in India.

Secondly, they were not isolated in Western style mission stations or in Western hotels from which they could look down on a culture from high up on the sixth or sixteenth floor. They lived humbly and thankfully where the people lived.

Thirdly, their orientation before leaving for the journey prepared them to be learners. It must have been refreshing for the people of India to entertain Americans who had left their air of superiority at home.

Why can't western "missionary" groups learn this same kind of humility? We do not seem to realize that our ideas are most acceptable to others when we are most accepting of theirs. Anthropologists have said this for years in relation to social change. The Christian missionary movement would do well to take it to heart and learn it, too.

In conclusion, I relate an incident I learned about from Latin America. A missionary said in his earlier years (presumably before he knew any better) that he took a large group of young people out to Guyana to build a church building. After three weeks of concentrated effort, the building was completed and presented to the local people. The Americans returned convinced that they had made a solid contribution to needy people.

Two years later the missionary who no longer lived in Guyana got a letter from the church people. It read, "The roof on your church building is leaking. Please come and fix it."

This points to another part of the dilemma of short-term projects. Too often ownership is perceived as belonging to the outsiders and not to the people themselves. It is not a pleasant thought, but outsiders who take ownership may just be stealing the self-respect of those whose privilege it is to help themselves. And none of us wants to be thought of as a thief - a thief of someone else's self-respect.

This must not be the end of this story. Positive short-term experiences should be reported for the encouragement of us all. The author requests that such positive experiences in short term service be sent to him so that a follow-up article can be published. In this way, we can encourage each other and thereby avoid some of the pitfalls in regard to short-term visits to the mission field.

In addition to this, I highly recommend reading a small book by Drs. Tom and Betty Sue Brewster entitled "Bonding and the Missionary Task: Establishing A Sense of Belonging". It is published by Lingua House (1982) and is available from Academic Publications Summer Institute of Linguistics, 7500 West Camp Wisdom Road, Dallas, Texas 75236. Everyone going to visit or serve in another culture should read and digest the contents of this little book.

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