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SHORT-TERM MISSIONS:  
MAKING A LONG-LASTING DIFFERENCE IN TODAY'S WORLD  
Simone Twibell

Over the course of the last few decades, short-term missions (STM)<sup>1</sup> has invigorated and challenged the missionary enterprise around the world like no other movement. In fact, close to 1.6 million adults from the United States travel abroad every year on STM trips.<sup>2</sup> During 2015, the Church of the Nazarene alone sent 618 short-term missions teams from the United States, including Work & Witness, University teams and Jesus Film Ministry teams. This effort involved the participation of 8,644 individuals who engaged in an intentional missional journey and stimulated missionary activity both at home and abroad.<sup>3</sup> The magnitude of this movement is remarkable, one that without a doubt will continue to attract with renewed interest both new and experienced travelers alike.

Although STM is currently a small part of a wide array of missional strategies, it is without a doubt one of the most noticeable and perhaps even the most appealing. Year after year, STM becomes an open invitation for youth groups, college students and church members to see the world first-hand and respond to the needs they encounter in tangible ways. For this reason, STM may be contributing to a new sense of “global citizenship”<sup>4</sup> or what Sociologist Kersten Priest has called a “globalization of empathy.”<sup>5</sup> However, STM has not always been perceived positively by those who have studied this phenomenon in depth. In fact, this movement has fomented debates among anthropologists, sociologists, missiologists, and practitioners who have openly questioned whether STM is truly as beneficial as it appears to be. While most discussions on STM have tended to focus on the impact upon the trip participants and their sending churches, less attention has been given to considering the impact upon the receiving community.

When discussing this remarkable movement, several questions emerge: What is the impact of STM on both the participating members and the receiving community? How does STM provide a desirable path for those seeking to engage in missions today? What are the positive and negative effects on the overall missionary enterprise? And finally, what lessons can be learned from past mistakes to ensure ongoing success in the practice of STM? This paper addresses these questions in four different categories: the underlying script behind STM, which trigger an impact on participants, an impact on the host community, and an impact on a wide array of global mission commitments. Having structured the information within the following

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<sup>1</sup> The term “short-term missions” refers to trips ranging from one week to two years, which may take place within North America or around the world.

<sup>2</sup> Wuthnow, Robert. 2009. *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> These numbers are based on statistics provided by Dawn Estep, from Global Mission Mobilization at the Global Ministry Center and Daniel Herrera, who serves as the Assistant Field Services Coordinator for Jesus Film Harvest Partners.

<sup>4</sup> Moodie, Ellen. 2013. “Inequality and intimacy between sister communities in El Salvador and the United States.” *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol. 41 No. 2, p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> Priest, Kersten B. 2008. “Women as resource brokers: STM trips, social and organizational ties, and mutual resource benefits.” In Priest R (ed.) *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right!* Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, p. 256.

categories as indicated by figure one, a list of practical considerations and missiological implications will follow.

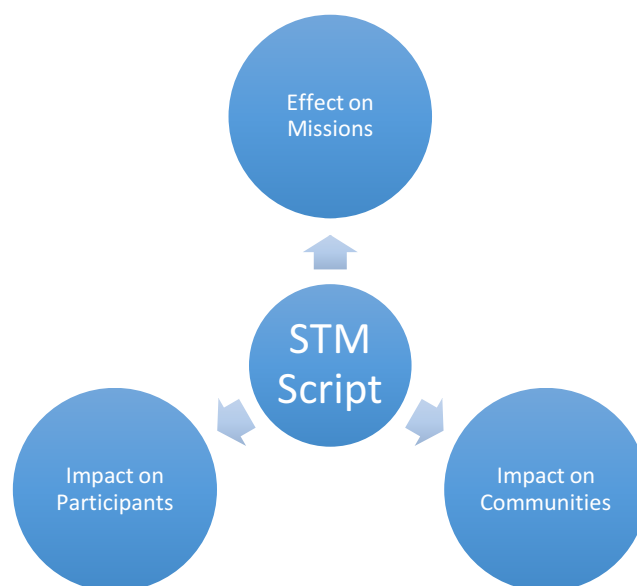


Figure 1: Critical Components in Understanding the STM Discourse

Source: Author

### *The Dynamics Involved in STM*

Among the two most prolific writers on short-term missions from an anthropological perspective are Brian Howell and Robert Priest. For that reason, this paper will draw heavily from their work so as to understand the cultural dynamics involved. By specifically looking at the research studies and perspectives of these two experts in the field of Christian anthropology, the goal is to then outline practical considerations and missiological implications as a way to carry their work forward. Without a doubt, Howell's ethnographic and Priest's quantitative work will help illumine the overarching role that STM has had both in practice and theory upon the individuals involved and the development of their communities.

In his seminal work, Brian Howell argues that "to understand how people think about these [STM] experiences, we must understand the creation and maintenance of narratives being generated."<sup>6</sup> As such, Howell chooses to focus on the particular language that the participants themselves utilize to understand their discourse as "narratives of connection and relationship."<sup>7</sup> Christian anthropologist Robert Priest, rather than focusing his work solely on the perspective of the traveler, seeks to unearth the perspectives of host communities as well as issues that affect and impact mission-related matters both at home and abroad. A recurrent question he seeks to

<sup>6</sup> Howell, Brian. 2012. *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Howell, Brian. 2009. "Mission to nowhere: putting short-term mission in context." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 34 No. 4, p. 206.

answer through his detailed analysis of STMs abroad is precisely how the communities are impacted through these trips. Summarized succinctly, Robert Priest argues that the impact upon the host community must be understood in terms of “linking social capital.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the STM movement stimulates social connections between Christian communities across wealth differentials, creating links between Christians with resources and those with less.

Brian Howell frames his discussion and understanding of STM largely in relation to the narratives and perspectives of the short-term missionaries themselves and out of the lived experiences and reenacted memories of the travelers. Specifically, Howell argues that STM must be understood primarily in terms of a pilgrimage, “drawn from the temporary experience of spiritual awareness, social equality and freedom from social constraint experienced in the journey.”<sup>9</sup> Howell further declares that STM is a “culturally mediated form of travel with particular dynamics” where “personal transformation, adventure and spiritual growth can only ever be by-products of the trip.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, for Howell, the benefits that short-term missionaries gain from the experience must be connected to the personal sacrifice embedded in the nature of these travels to fully understand their dynamics. After all, STM is essentially about service, calling, and active participation in missions, not just about individual transformation.

In an article featured in *Christianity Today*, Priest also insists that mission trips function as a “sustained and communal time of spiritual formation away from the obligations, distractions, and routines of everyday life in home spaces.”<sup>11</sup> All of these attributes contribute to the perception of the STM movement largely as “personalist,” which invites the pursuit of a transcendental experience over the priority of learning and understanding the cultural dynamics and need of those being served. As a final word on the script that STM has naturally generated, it suffices to say that, as Howell wisely notes, “STM is not exactly tourism, pilgrimage, or mission but a hybrid of all three and a thing unto itself.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Impact on STM Participants*

As previously mentioned, the mission trip serves as a form of spiritual journey that rejuvenates, invigorates and enlightens those who participate in such travels. Although the conversation often focuses upon the positive benefits that short-termers experience as a result of their missional engagement, the STM movement also presents several limitations and obstacles. This section provides a brief summary of both the positive outcomes and bewildering limitations when considering the overall impact of STM upon the participant.

Howell’s ethnographic work shows that STM trips result in “life-changing” and “eye-opening” experiences, profusely transforming the ways in which travelers see the world.<sup>13</sup> For

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<sup>8</sup> Priest, Robert J. 2007. “Peruvian churches acquire ‘linking social capital’ through STM partnerships. *Journal of Latin American Theology – Special Issue on Short-Term Missions in Latin America*. Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 175-189

<sup>9</sup> Howell, Brian. 2012, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp.56-57.

<sup>11</sup> Howell, et. al. 2012. “The dilemma of resource stewardship: should Christians abandon travel-intensive short-term missions in favor of local projects?” in *Christianity Today* Vol. 56 No. 6 pp. 60-61.

<sup>12</sup> Howell, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Howell, 2012, p. 21.

many participants, Howell argues, STM becomes an opportunity to encounter the world directly and meet the conditions of poverty, economic disparity, and social inequality that prevails and characterizes the Majority World. Furthermore, Howell perceives the STM movement as an opportunity for Christians to not only deepen their relationship with fellow travelers, but also as an invitation to learn from and interact with Christians from other parts of the world. These relationships must be continually nourished in partnerships and collaborative efforts.<sup>14</sup> Priest distinctly observes that STM has the capacity to increase “social trust” and bring about changes in attitudes and perceptions towards foreigners.<sup>15</sup> Without a doubt, the greatest impact that STM has upon the participant centers on the increased cultural awareness, spiritual reinvigoration, and relational connection garnered from the overall experience of the trip.

Despite all these positive outcomes, however, several limitations remain. One must logically and naturally ponder whether cultural sensitivity, inter-ethnic relationships, long-lasting personal changes, and long-term missionary involvement are likely to occur as a result of these trips. In an interview published by *Christianity Today*, Howell articulates his vision of what the mission trip experience should consist. He states, “The whole trip should be an experience of learning, growing, and serving God. Listening and learning from people, about people, about places, about what God is doing.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than falling prey to the “homogenizing effect” of contemporary tourism, in which “real human connection is lost in favor of an experience,” Howell advocates for a closer look at the history, context, and culture of the place visited in order to form relational connections that are also informed by cultural peculiarities.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, an important consideration which merits great attention in the STM activity lies precisely in developing an appropriate pedagogical framework by which individual experiences may be consciously filtered and maintained long-term. For example, one would expect that contact with cultural “others” abroad might translate into developing inter-ethnic relationships at home. Contrary to this expectation, research conducted by Priest et. al. reveals that no statistical correlation exists between the amount of STM activity abroad and current interethnic relationships back home.<sup>18</sup> This disturbing finding could easily lead to the perception of the short-termer as a tourist with a religious agenda who might withdraw from social others at home but is willing to travel miles away to engage others abroad.

### *Impact on Host Communities*

Although seeing the world is an important component of the trip, many participants have not been prepared to fully understand what they see. As Robert Priest, professor of Intercultural Studies at Trinity International University, indicates, “They see everything and understand nothing.”<sup>19</sup> Preparation and training are key components to ensure strategic and positive

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>15</sup> Priest, RJ, Dischinger T, Rasmusen S and Brown CM. 2006. “Researching the short-term mission movement.” *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol. 34 No. 4 p. 444.

<sup>16</sup> Haanen, Jeff. 2013. “Better partners: how can short-term missions best advance God’s mission?” Interview with Brian Howell. *Christianity Today* Vol. 57 p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Howell, 2012, p.77.

<sup>18</sup> Priest, RJ, Dischinger T, Rasmusen S and Brown CM. 2006. “Researching the short-term mission movement.” *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol. 34 No. 4 pp. 445.

<sup>19</sup> Priest, RJ and Priest JP. 2008. “They see everything and understanding nothing: short-term missions and service learning.” *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol. 36. No. 1 pp. 53-73.

outcomes. But what about the members of the host community? How are they impacted through these trips? In a sample survey administered to 551 Protestant pastors in Lima, Peru, 58% reported having hosted a group of STM missionaries from abroad. Interestingly, all of these pastors were, in Priest's words, "overwhelmingly positive about collaborative relations."<sup>20</sup>

Priest also points out that although the financial resources involved in STM groups are not directly poured out into the host community *per se*, these teams are desired for other reasons. For example, when engaged in presentations of the Gospel message, the host culture was much more open to the evangelistic efforts of national leaders when Americans accompanied them. As a result, the evangelistic impact was greater when STM groups were present.<sup>21</sup> In a particular Peruvian community, having received a team composed of nearly 200 short-term missionaries from Minneapolis, joint collaborations enabled the nationals to use their visitors as "hooks" to invite the community to participate in missional activities.

When underpinned by life-giving service, sacrificial stewardship, and wise leadership STM clearly impacts the community in positive ways. Indeed, Priest argues that STM groups play a key role in bringing Christians from wealthy nations to creatively partner with Christians from financially constricted parts of the world to faithfully engage in joint ministry for the expansion of the Kingdom. In their current form, despite the billions of dollars invested in travel-related costs every year, hundreds of thousands of Christians from around the world are entering into collaborative efforts with short-termers. In Priest's words, "the host country Christians are often the key to long-term successful ministry outcomes."<sup>22</sup>

A personal experience might help illumine exactly what Priest describes. My first exposure to short-term missions came as a result of helping as an interpreter for a Work & Witness<sup>23</sup> team from Newport, Oregon. This group came to serve the church in San Diego de los Altos, Venezuela, where my family lived as regional missionaries twenty years ago. With my broken English, I sought to serve our visitors as best as I could, but I knew I had much to learn. That first exposure to short-term missions opened my eyes to the incredible cultural dynamics so prevalent in the missionary enterprise. To begin, it made me aware of the importance of acquiring skills to appropriately communicate in someone else's language. It also sparked my interest in continuing to serve as a missionary, whether at home or abroad, wherever the Lord would lead. As a member of the host culture on the receiving end of these short-term missions trips, such experiences provided an invaluable opportunity to learn about the United States and the American church. Perhaps most importantly, my early experience with short-term missions teams allowed me to develop some of the most wonderful relationships with friends that, to this very day, still send me Christmas cards and newsletters every year. And, if nothing else, these North American missionaries brought the wonderful world of peanut butter and macaroni and cheese into existence for a South American girl.

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<sup>20</sup> Priest, Robert J. 2007. "Peruvian churches acquire 'linking social capital' through STM partnerships. *Journal of Latin American Theology – Special Issue on Short-Term Missions in Latin America*. Vol. 2 No. 2, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>22</sup> Priest, Robert. 2007b. "Introduction: short-term missions and the Latin American church." *Journal of Latin American Theology*. Vol. 2. No. 2 p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Work and Witness is the Nazarene term used for STM hosted by local churches, in which service and proclamation are key components of the trip.

A few years after that first encounter with American short-termers, I had the opportunity to visit the United States for the very first time. Thanks to the hospitality and generosity of those who participated on that first Work & Witness team, I had the privilege of spending an entire month learning about the American culture, becoming a part of a wonderful church youth group, and making lifelong friends. As would be expected, coming into contact with short-termers motivated me to engage in the adventure of STM myself. Though I do not remember much about my first trip, I do remember how this experience became a “hook” for the multiple trips which I would later have the privilege of leading. The impact of that group of short termers certainly led to bridging “social capital.”

### *The Effect of STM on the Overall Missionary Enterprise*

Apart from the personal and community impact, STM has exerted incredible weight upon missionary efforts. Most of them have contributed to the expansion of the Kingdom of God, but have not been devoid of sporadic challenges and misconceptions. In a relatively recent article, Howell argues that STM, rather than being instrumental in the contextualization process inherently involved in missions, has contributed to its “decontextualization.”<sup>24</sup> He then proceeds to describe four elements of STM practice that have led to this unconscious process. First, because short-termers seek to present their work as something other than tourism, focus on the particular context has not been duly emphasized. Second, the rhetoric behind the “missionary call” has led to the minimization of particular realities embedded in the social structure of the context. Third, the language of missions conscripted in the STM movement often leads to a mission based on poverty, plight, and need to the exclusion of truly understanding deeper needs. Finally, the post-trip reflections often exhibited by pictures presented in home churches create a distancing and decontextualization of the Other.<sup>25</sup> Rather than removing obvious obstacles, the configuration of STM practice, in Howell’s words, “often makes it difficult for students to examine history, context, and culture.”<sup>26</sup> Instead of gaining intellectual acuity, short-termers are often unprepared to deal with the particularities of the location visited. Hence, Howell proposes that STM trips should foster “real connections” with the specific places so that plans and purposes may be more appropriately carried out.<sup>27</sup>

In considering the impact of short-term missions on the overall missionary enterprise, it is also important to ask whether short-termers are likely to engage in long-term missions and/or support mission-related causes as a result of such engagement. Priest et. al. have spent considerable time researching the effects of STM on the recruitment and support of career missionaries and have found that the widely held view that STM participation increases the *interest* in career missionary service was indeed accurate.<sup>28</sup> The question remains, however, as to whether or not this interest is translated into actual long-term service. In their research, Priest et. al. reason that though the number of individuals willing to serve may rise with STM participation, finding funds to support these individuals becomes the limiting factor that prevents long-term participation. Another critical question considered by Priest’s research team centered

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<sup>24</sup> Howell, Brian. 2009. “Mission to nowhere: putting short-term mission in context.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 34 No. 4 p. 206.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.206.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.207.

<sup>27</sup> Howell, 2009, p. 211.

<sup>28</sup> Priest et. al. 2006, p. 437.

on determining whether seminary participants in STM supported missions around the world financially as compared to those who had no STM experience. Surprisingly, their research showed no relationship between the amount of STM participation and the financial support given to missions.<sup>29</sup>

One final component of their research also uncovered an important dimension regarding sacrificial stewardship. When individuals with extensive STM experience and individuals with no involvement were surveyed to compare their materialistic tendencies and attitudes, the findings revealed that those with STM experience were fully as materialistic as those with none.<sup>30</sup> Unless careful attention, ongoing reflection, and purposeful discipleship are given to this important aspect of the Christian life, natural tendencies toward materialism may continue to go unchallenged for affluent participants.

As currently practiced, STM does not appear to be impacting the overall missionary enterprise as intended. However, STM will undoubtedly continue to be practiced in the future. Thus, the question must be considered as to which practices must be put in place to ensure a dynamic encounter between “cultural others” that go beyond superficial exchanges. Certainly, the potential for STM is unsurmountable and its prospects for the future are far from looking dim. However, goals must be properly clarified, preparation must be duly emphasized, and ongoing research carefully devised to ensure that healthy habits and patterns are duly formed.

Although in many cases STM has often been less effective in producing long-lasting changes in the physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of life, its place and role in yielding fruitful and promising results cannot be denied. As with every aspect of missions, critical reflection and theological frameworks must undergo ongoing development for creating a thorough understanding of new social dynamics in our fast-changing world. As a word of conclusion, I hereby offer a few missiological implications followed by practical considerations based on my own reflections and experience as a former volunteer missionary leading USA/Canada Jesus Film Harvest Partners teams to the Mesoamerica Region in the Church of the Nazarene.

#### *Missiological Implications*

First, collaborative efforts and partnerships among Christians from different parts of the world have recurrently shown that the body of Christ can function more dynamically and powerfully when social and cultural differences are set aside for the sake of the Kingdom. It becomes imperative for each participant to be aware and properly informed regarding the cultural particularities of the place visited. For those with little cross-cultural experience, participation in short-term missions serves as a lens by which the cultural dynamics of a globalized world may be filtered. To ensure that the experience is holistic and comprehensive, it must be accompanied with proper instruction and follow-up.

Second, participants who desire to engage in missions cross-culturally through the STM movement are faced with social realities that challenge the participants to make personal changes and respond appropriately to the needs encountered. As Robert Priest rightly comments, simply being grateful for the possessions and resources we have been given is not enough. Gratefulness

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.438.

<sup>30</sup> Priest et. al. 2006, p.440.



must be accompanied by action and life changes that reflect the simplicity that the Gospel requires of us as faithful disciples of Christ.

Third, in the process of “reflexivity” where cultural Others encounter each other, cultural blind spots must be identified so that the body of Christ may grow more efficiently in its function and organization around the world. Ethnocentric and egocentric tendencies need to be exposed so that instead of enlarging an ocean of confusion for lack of proper understanding, the experience is transferred to treating cultural Others at home with dignity and respect. Changing the mentality from helper to learner and cultivating an attitude of humility and understanding are necessities in the process. Only then will short-term missions truly bring long-term results in the lives of all those involved and become a valued component in the realm of global missions.

Finally, other questions and issues remain unsolved, which require thoughtful reflection and future research. Naturally, one must ponder about the likelihood of long-term missionary involvement among the nationals due to serving alongside short-termers. Does the presence of short-termers in their homelands spark any interest in missionary involvement among nationals? Furthermore, what are the dynamics involved and impact created by STM teams from poorer countries who travel to nations more affluent than their own? And how are the perceptions and attitudes challenged and changed among members of the host community due to the visit of short-termers? Further research is certainly necessary.

Without a doubt, STM has yielded fruitful and promising results, from creating life-changing, eye-opening, and transformative experiences to fostering new relationships in a global community. In this final section I offer some practical lessons and considerations for those involved in the practice of STM. My goal is to provide guidelines and a few suggestions that will gear the practice of STM towards becoming an even more holistic and efficient ministry.

### *Practical Considerations*

First, *make the trip about learning but don't make it all about yourself*. It is important to recognize that God is at work in other places and has raised up strong local leaders who are already engaged in missional work. Changing the mentality from helper to learner and cultivating an attitude of humility and understanding are necessities in the process. Talk with the locals, even if an interpreter is required and learn about their culture, history, and particular needs. Cultivate a spirit of inquisition and use it to further the Kingdom of God in practical ways.

Second, *establish partnerships with the local church visited*. Plan to return to the same place again. The body of Christ can function more dynamically and powerfully as social and cultural differences are set aside for the sake of Kingdom work. Ongoing collaborative efforts must be appropriately enforced to ensure healthy patterns in mission work.

Third, *engage in less project-intensive jobs and focus on building relationships*. Unless your team has a specific goal and skill, such as construction work or drilling water wells, initiate partnerships that can continue to provide support to the overall mission of the local church abroad. Jesus Film Harvest Partners are a great venue for short-term missionaries who desire to engage in mission work first-hand but are not trained for specific project jobs. Getting to know people and making friends abroad will prove beneficial for both parties as both will be enriched by the sharing of gifts, resources, and perspectives that God has specifically given to each.

Fourth, *make long-lasting personal changes in your lifestyle*. As a result of encountering the overwhelming need so prevalent elsewhere, we must also identify our own cultural blind

spots so that we may reflect the image of Christ in God-honoring ways. When faced with social realities that require a drastic response, participants must be willing to reframe their own materialistic habits. Simply being grateful for the possessions and resources we have been given is not enough. We must be committed to giving and resourcing our brothers and sisters who are in dire need around the world.

Finally, *transfer home the experiences learned abroad*. Upon return, educate your congregation through vision-casting, cultural awareness, and ongoing partnerships. Become more active in engaging cultural “others” at home. Research suggests that no correlation exists between the amount of STM activity abroad and current interethnic relationships back home.<sup>31</sup> This should alert us to the necessity of learning from cultural “others” in our own country and not simply when we leave the familiarity of our home.

As with every aspect of missions, critical reflection and preparation must be key components for creating an informed response to the new and rapidly changing dynamics of our current world. As we continue to engage in short-term missions, let us do so seeking to implement more effective strategies so that we may also make long-term contributions for the sake of the Kingdom. Only then will we truly make a difference in our globalized world.

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<sup>31</sup> Priest, et al 2006.

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