

Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions

The long-term impact of short-term missions on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of young adults

“I was always taught that God didn’t take sides, but living in a Third World culture amongst the poor (with a Muslim family in Dhaka, Bangladesh) I found myself reading my Bible differently. I realized that God is on the side of the poor and that He sometimes comes to their aid in dramatic ways like the Exodus from Egypt.”

As this young man reflected on the impact of his one-year mission experience in Bangladesh, I was amazed at his insights and the evidence of God’s hand on his life. He was one of more than 30 young adults returning from short-term mission programs I interviewed in my doctoral research study of five Anabaptist short-term mission programs.

Within the past generation, the western Protestant church has experienced explosive growth in short-term missions. This, combined with declining numbers of long-term mission personnel, has been called the most significant change in modern missions history. Considerable disposable wealth, inexpensive and efficient air travel, and excellent communication resources have made short-term missions accessible to many North Americans. In addition to thousands of churches sending teams, there are hundreds of specialized short-term mission organizations that facilitate every aspect of the experience.

While most acknowledge the short-term mission phenomenon is here to stay, the movement has attracted considerable scrutiny within the broader missions community. Concerns have been raised about ethnocentrism, relational shallowness, self-serving impact, and overall cost. Encouraging these concerns are the poorly organized and missiologically weak cross-cultural assignments that have proliferated, which have the potential to do more harm than good.

What is the long-term value of this growing short-term missions phenomenon?

This is the question I’ve set out to answer over the past three years with a research study of 116 short-term mission participants from five short-term mission (STM) programs. All participants were ages 18 to 30 and had served on assignments ranging

from one month to a year. They served in one of five Mennonite-related STM programs: Youth Mission International’s ACTION and TREK programs, Mennonite Central Committee’s SALT program, Eastern Mennonite Mission’s YES program, and Rosedale Mennonite Mission’s REACH program. Data was collected from these participants over the course of two years in three stages: pre-trip, post-trip and a follow-up stage one year after they returned.

The research design focused on measuring changes in 24 concepts related to participants’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in their relationship with God, the church and the world around them. The results are fascinating. Here are a few:

1. STM participants experienced significant positive change in their beliefs, attitudes and behaviour during their mission experience.
2. A year after they returned, STM participants experienced significant regression in virtually all of the positive changes they had made, in some cases below the level they started at.
3. First-time STM participants experienced the most significant positive change, but also the most significant decline in beliefs, attitudes and behaviour a year later as compared to repeat participants.
4. The longer an STM experience, the deeper and more lasting its impact on participants’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviour.
5. Pre-trip discipleship training has a significant positive impact on the type and degree of change in the values of STM participants.
6. Cross-cultural (as opposed to domestic) assignments have a lasting positive impact on participants’ value of the global church.
7. Supportive families have a significant positive impact on participants’ value of teamwork and evangelism.
8. Churches that strongly support STM participants can have a significant positive impact on participants’ value of purity once they return.
9. STM participants who serve on assignment as individuals (rather than in teams) experience significantly less growth in their value of Christian community and teamwork in ministry.

10. The more often that participants serve on STM assignments – the more interested they are in future full-time mission work.

So, what are the implications for churches, mission organizations and STM participants?

1. Discipleship training before and after an STM is critical. Participants in organizations that didn’t emphasize pre- and post-trip discipleship training were consistently lower on almost all positive beliefs, attitudes and behaviour change scores. The anticipation of an STM experience provides a unique teachable window in the life of a participant. To miss this window is an irresponsible use of the STM experience.
2. We are not doing enough to debrief and follow up STM participants. The huge fall-off in positive beliefs, attitudes and behaviour change scores a year following the STM experience indicates there is a battle for the hearts of our STM alumni. We are not allocating enough resources to coordinate the discipleship follow-through at the local church level. The discipleship baton is getting dropped on the track and some of these runners are no longer in the race.
3. Supportive families and churches can have significant positive contribution in STM alumni’s ability to retain the positive changes they experienced through missions. How about discipleship contracts between gifted mentors and STM participants, negotiated before the young adults leave?.
4. Multiple STM experiences are moving young adults deeper into a missional life. Encourage young adults to experience STM, pray for them, support them and then follow-up with them.

by Randy Friesen

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