

## Go and Make Disciples... In Two Weeks:

### An Analysis of the Origins, Reasons, and Recommendations for Short-Term Missions

Tier One

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Critical study of short-term missions is necessary in order to bring about positive change in short-term missions. In *Go and Make Disciples... In Two Weeks: An Analysis of the Origins, Reasons, and Recommendations for Short-term Missions*, the origins and rationale for short-term missions are carefully evaluated and recommendations for improving short-term missions are offered. The origins of short-term missions are studied, demonstrating the growth and increasing popularity of short-term missions. In spite of its popularity, a significant separation exists between academia and practice in short-term missions. The lack of quality academic scholarship in the field is explained, establishing a need for more scholarly evaluation of short-term missions. The rationale for short-term missions is examined in three parts. First, the Biblical foundation for short-term missions is studied. It is determined that short-term missions is a Biblical concept. Second, nine practical reasons that are frequently stated for short-term missions are provided and evaluated through discussion of the positives and negatives of each reason. Third, the focus of short-term missions is discussed, particularly the debate between focusing on participants and recipients. It is established that short-term missions can focus on both the participants and the recipients, rather than simply choosing one or the other. Finally, based on previous discussion, seven recommendations for improving short-term missions are offered, ranging from better training of participants to partnership with nationals.

A fifteen year old girl, camera and bag of souvenirs in tow, walks out of the secure area of the airport and into the arms of her parents, anxious to see their daughter after her two-week mission trip to Africa. They ask her about her experiences, and she describes, “It was wonderful! I held this little boy at an orphanage for two whole hours, and I can just tell that his life was totally changed because of me. It was kind of hard because I don’t speak their language, but my group and I learned how to say ‘Jesus loves you,’ in their language, so I’m sure that lots of people learned about Him from us. Also, my group went on a safari, and we saw elephants and giraffes. I got to try eating ants, too. It was a great trip. I just feel so on fire for God now, and I really bonded with the other people on my team.”

Scenes like this occur at airports around the United States throughout the year, as short-term mission trip participants of all ages return home and tell others about their experiences. Their testimonies make short-term missions sound godly, adventurous, and fun, and partly based on their stories, people continue to participate in short-term mission trips. Unfortunately, these reports of short-term missions frequently focus on or even overestimate the positives without considering some of the negatives. There are numerous reasons or goals for short-term missions, and it is not always clear if the goals are being accomplished. Some wonder whether short-term missions is truly as effective as many claim it is, while others question who should be the focus of short-term missions: the participants or the recipients.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the popularity of short-term missions, it has not been adequately discussed and studied by scholars, and its effectiveness still needs to be evaluated in terms of quality and true value. Study is necessary because critical examination can help reveal ways to encourage positive change in short-term missions.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, “participant” is used to refer to a person going on a short-term mission trip. The terms “recipients,” “receivers,” and “nationals” are used synonymously to refer to the people in the foreign country that the short-term mission team comes into contact with through their work.

## The Origins of Short-Term Missions

Apart from a few isolated instances of short-term missions experiences in history, “short-term missions” (a mission trip to a foreign country that lasts approximately two weeks)<sup>2</sup> is a relatively recent method of missions that has risen to popularity within the last 50 years. Stan Guthrie writes, “Short-term ministry is an option few other generations of Western Christians<sup>3</sup>, much less their non-Western counterparts, ever considered.”<sup>4</sup> The development of short-term missions is primarily attributed to the globalization of the world “and the ease and accessibility of travel that comes with it.”<sup>5</sup> Affordable air travel and the rapid growth of the Internet and other global communication methods<sup>6</sup> has made it simple for nearly any church leader or missions organization to arrange a short-term mission trip through connections in a foreign country.

The founding of two short-term youth missions organizations - Youth With A Mission and Operation Mobilization - in the 1960s formally marks the beginning of the short-term missions movement. About 500 people participated in short-term missions annually in the mid-1960s. By 1992, the number of short-term mission participants had surpassed the number of United States<sup>7</sup> long-term missionaries overseas,<sup>8</sup> and that number continues to grow as people of all ages participate through their own churches or through short-term missions organizations. Even when the total world population increase is considered, the growth of short-term missions

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<sup>2</sup> The term “short-term missions” is often defined in different ways, with some people calling an afternoon at a local soup kitchen “short-term missions,” while others call a recent college graduate’s two-year commitment to be a missionary “short-term missions.” For the purpose of this paper, “short-term missions” refers to what missions scholar Roger Peterson calls “*standard* short-term missions” – a mission trip to a foreign country that lasts approximately two weeks. See Roger Peterson, Gordon Aeschliman, and R. Wayne Sneed. *Maximum Impact Short-term Mission* (Minneapolis: Stem Press, 2003), 69.

<sup>3</sup> While Christians from all over the world participate in short-term missions and some of the information may be applicable to them, the research gathered for this discussion is especially concerned with short-term missions as it involves Western Christians, especially those from the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Stan Guthrie, *Missions in the Third Millennium* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), 86.

<sup>5</sup> David Livermore, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat* for more information about the current growth of global communication methods. While Friedman’s book does not directly reference short-term missions, his reports about globalization and worldwide technology explain the changes in the world that have made short-term missions an easily accessible form of missions.

<sup>7</sup> Out of sensitivity to citizens of all of the countries in both North and South America, the term “American” to refer to people from the United States will be avoided, except when it appears in a direct quote from an outside source.

<sup>8</sup> Barnes, “The Changing Face,” 376.

participants over the past forty years is astounding, causing many to refer to the growth as an “explosion” of popularity in short-term missions (see Appendix 1).<sup>9</sup>

Short-term missions is now more popular than ever; one writer says that “today, short-term mission trips are as common as high school proms.”<sup>10</sup> While exact numbers of participants are difficult to calculate, the most recent figures estimate that at least 1.6 million people from the United States participated in Christian<sup>11</sup> short-term missions in 2005.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, 60,000 long-term United States missionaries are currently serving overseas.<sup>13</sup> As the number of participants has grown, so has the total budget for short-term missions. Some scholars estimate that at least one billion dollars is spent every year on short-term missions, which is more than is spent every year on long-term missions.<sup>14</sup>

The popularity of short-missions is evident. One of the ramifications of the explosion of short-term missions is that participation grew at a much faster rate than scholarly research about short-term missions, and scholarship about short-term missions has yet to “catch up.” Because it was viewed as a “fad” or a “phenomenon” by long-term missionaries<sup>15</sup> when it was first introduced, short-term missions was largely ignored by the academic world, while it continued to increase in popularity. The few books and articles that were written about short-term missions generally focused more on the logistics of it, like arranging plane flights and dealing with travel insurance, than they did on any kind of quality control. Only within the past ten years or so have missions scholars finally begun to acknowledge that short-term missions is continuing to happen and deserves scholarly attention.

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<sup>9</sup> Guthrie, *Third Millennium*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 254.

<sup>11</sup> Both Protestant and Catholic. Most estimates exclude Latter Day Saints mission work.

<sup>12</sup> David Livermore, “Cultural Intelligence and Short-term Missions,” *Short-term Missions, Grand Rapids Theological Seminary*, <http://grts.cornerstone.edu/resources/glc/stmissions> (accessed March 1, 2008), 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> David Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 12; David Mays, “Six Challenges for the Church in Missions,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 42 (2006): 312.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Pocock, “Gaining Long-term Mileage from Short-term Programs,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 23 (1987): 154, 160.

Much of the writing on short-term missions that does exist is anecdotal, and is not founded on the research of others (or the writer's own research). It is astonishing how many journal articles about short-term missions do not cite a single reference, but simply contain a few stories about the author's own missions experiences. While stories can help illustrate, firm data and "longitudinal study"<sup>16</sup> about short-term missions is needed. It is challenging and costly for researchers to travel to the mission field to do research, so many researchers struggle with finding accurate quantitative data about short-term missions.

Therefore, significant separation exists in short-term missions between academia and practice. Robert Priests writes, "Short-term mission work moves ahead in a way that it is almost completely divorced from scholarship, missiology, and seminary education."<sup>17</sup> While scholars are slowly beginning to evaluate some of the issues surrounding short-term missions, like motivation, purpose, and effectiveness, youth ministers and other church leaders continue to arrange short-term mission experiences, but generally without formal training, and without many written scholarly resources to help them prepare. As a result, people are blindly going into short-term missions not because they see a strong Biblical or scholarly foundation for it, but simply because it seems like a good idea on the surface. Therefore, the motivations for participation in short-term missions need to be evaluated on the scholarly level both for validity and effectiveness.

### **The Rationale for Short-term Missions**

There is no question that short-term missions is being done. The question that has not been examined fully is: why? There are three areas to look at regarding the rationale behind short-term missions: its Biblical foundation, the practical reasons given for it, and its focus.

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<sup>16</sup> David Livermore, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Robert J. Priest and others, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology* 34 (2006), <http://ebsco.com> (accessed March 2, 2008).

### The Biblical Foundation for Short-term Missions

While the purpose of this paper is not to seriously debate the Biblical concept of missions (plenty of debate has already been done in that area!), it is important to briefly consider the Biblical foundation for missions in general, and especially for short-term missions. Scripture contains examples of God's people being involved in missions, and His exhortations to His people to do missions. In the Old Testament times, the nation of Israel was intended to show God's work to the rest of the world,<sup>18</sup> while individual prophets like Jonah preached God's Word to people who did not know it.<sup>19</sup> During His time on earth, Christ encouraged missions by sending out the disciples to do His work<sup>20</sup> and by encouraging them through His own words, seen in oft-quoted passages like the Great Commission found in Matthew and the other Gospels.<sup>21</sup> After Christ's ascension, the disciples carried out "missions," as seen in Acts and the rest of the New Testament through the lives of people like the apostle Paul.

While the Biblical foundation for missions is generally accepted by Christians around the world, there is not such a widely-accepted Scriptural precedent for short-term missions, specifically. Some claim that because the Bible nowhere contains an account of 25 teenagers going on a two-week mission trip to build homes and do puppet shows, short-term missions is ungodly. Others, like missiologist Roger Peterson, say the Bible does contain examples of short-term missions. He has found over thirty "proof-text passages" that he believes demonstrate short-term missions in the Bible, from Nehemiah's short-term construction job to Jesus' short conversation at the well with the Samaritan woman.<sup>22</sup> While some of these examples might technically be considered "short-term missions," Peterson is treading on dangerous theological

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<sup>18</sup> See Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:4-6.

<sup>19</sup> See Jonah 1:1, 3:1-10.

<sup>20</sup> See Matthew 10:1-6; Mark 3:14-15, 6:7; Luke 9:1-9, 10:1-24.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 28:18-20. See also Mark 16:15-16, John 20:21, Acts 1:8.

<sup>22</sup> See Peterson, *Maximum Impact*, 197-236.

ground as he tries to take specific one-time examples from a different culture living at least 2000 years ago and apply them to 1.6 million people doing short-term missions today.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, the absence of explicit Biblical commands to do missions does not necessarily mean that short-term missions is wrong. The Bible never stipulates that missions must last at least four years to be valid. Missions is something that God's people are called to do in different times and different places. Sometimes "missions" is being sent to a foreign country for twenty years, but sometimes it is driving down the street to the local soup kitchen and serving dinner there. The Bible indicates that God's people are called to show His love and do His work and short-term missions is one way (but not the only way!) that can be done.

#### Practical Reasons for Short-term Missions

In addition to its Biblical foundation, there are many other reasons and goals given for doing short-term missions. Evaluation of these reasons, based on what actually happens in the practice of short-term missions, is necessary, and both the positives and negatives of these reasons will be discussed in this section.

##### 1. *"Short-term missions spreads the Gospel of Jesus to non-believers."*

By definition, the purpose of short-term missions is to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to non-believers around the world in accordance with Biblical principles. Short-term mission teams generally seek to do this through a variety of different methods. Some focus on explicit evangelism, like drama or puppet presentations that tell the basic story of the Bible, while others seek to build relationships with people by doing things like running an "English as a Second Language" day camp, distributing hygiene kits, or operating a soup kitchen. Through these relationships, teams are able to bring the message of Christ to the people they encounter.

While this is a worthwhile and admirable goal, it can also be more difficult to accomplish than it seems because of the nature of short-term missions. Short-term participants sometimes overestimate their impact and "have illusions of grandeur about what they can accomplish

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<sup>23</sup> David Livermore, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2008.

without the language, without long-term commitment and incarnational identification with the people they would reach.”<sup>24</sup> Cultural barriers can be hard to deal with in a lifetime of mission work, and infinitely more so in a short-term setting. Palmatier points out that “genuine conversion does not usually happen in a week.”<sup>25</sup> While spreading the Gospel can be done effectively through short-term missions, it can also be hard work.

2. “*Short-term missions improves the welfare of the recipients.*”

Many of the “relationship-building” methods used to spread the Gospel serve a dual purpose: Not only do they provide opportunities to talk about Christ, but these methods can also help improve the physical or economic welfare of the receivers. This is seen in mission trips that focus on things like housebuilding, medical missions, and food distribution. Caring for the poor is supported by Scripture<sup>26</sup> and society. In many regions of the world there is a need for relief or poverty alleviation, and many short-term teams are able to help with poverty issues in powerful ways through their work. Unfortunately, short-term teams do not always do necessary or effective work as they seek to improve the welfare of others.

Sometimes short-term teams end up doing unnecessary work. One of the frequent complaints of national people in countries that receive short-term mission teams is that the participants come in thinking that they are bringing a valuable economic resource, like a new home, food, or toiletry items, when in truth, the people living there did not want or need that economic resource.<sup>27</sup> This often happens because short-term mission projects are frequently initiated by the participants, rather than nationals within the country. Allen comments on this, saying, “Westerners might think: *We know what these people need.* or *We have a good idea to*

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<sup>24</sup> Robertson McQuilkin, “Six Inflammatory Questions – Part Two,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 30 (1994): 261.

<sup>25</sup> Aaron Palmatier, “Spring Break Mission Trips: A Blessing or a Curse?” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 38 (2002): 230.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

<sup>27</sup> Palmatier, “Spring Break,” 229, 231.

*help these people,*”<sup>28</sup> when in reality, they are doing unnecessary work that frequently costs a lot of money – money that could have been used for something truly helpful.

Also, because short-term missions “projects” generally have very strict criteria – for example, able to be completed in only a few days or weeks, need to be done by unskilled workers, or need to be done by people who cannot speak the national language. – there are times when projects are “invented” to occupy a short-term mission team, rather than having projects that develop out of a true need for their completion. For example, the director of World Vision in Mexico City says “My church gets painted once a year whether it needs it or not.”<sup>29</sup> Allen calls this “Benevolent colonialism,” which means that “Americans enter a foreign culture and impose unneeded ‘good.’”<sup>30</sup> It seems strange to have short-term mission participants sacrifice time and money to travel to a foreign country, only to do an unnecessary project.

Sometimes, short-term participants from the United States can develop a “We are rich Americans, here to save the day!” attitude. In an interview with Diane Sawyer, Brad Pitt made the statement, “Listen, we who were born in America have to understand, we hit the lottery by growing up here, by being born here.”<sup>31</sup> While Pitt’s own work to benefit victims of the AIDS epidemic in Africa is notable and admirable, his attitude unfortunately reflects all too well the general mentality of many short-term mission participants involved in poverty relief: “we’re blessed, and you’re not.” This idea can be a huge stumbling block to short-term missions, because it is simply not true. While there are certainly billions around the world in need of economic help, it is overly simplistic to say that short-term missions is about Western Christians saving everyone else from their poor, destitute lives. As one Ugandan church leader said, “We did not know we were poor until someone from the outside told us.”<sup>32</sup> This patronizing attitude

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<sup>28</sup> Marshall Allen, “International Short-term Missions: A Divergence from the Great Commission?” *Youthworker* 17, no. 5 (2001): 44.

<sup>29</sup> Allen, “Divergence,” 42.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Livermore, *Serving*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

held by some participants can make it difficult for them to enter into relationships in which they can truly reach the nationals with the Gospel as they serve.

One final topic involved in this discussion about welfare is the expense of short-term missions in relation to benefiting the receiving culture. One of the common criticisms of short-term mission projects, especially those involving construction, is that “invariably, it costs much more for a foreign group to do any kind of ministry or construction than it would cost a comparable group of local Christians to do the same thing.”<sup>33</sup> Jo Ann VanEngen, a missionary in Honduras, studied the work of a spring-break relief team that painted and cleaned an orphanage there. She concluded that the amount of money that the spring-break team used for their trip “could have paid two Honduran painters who desperately needed the work, with enough left over to hire four new teachers, build a new dormitory, and provide each child with new clothes.”<sup>34</sup> These kinds of reports cause many to question the helpfulness of short-term missions. Some wonder if United States churches should just take the money that would have been spent on a short-term mission trip and instead send it directly to a community.

This is a valid and difficult question to ask about short-term missions, but examination of it in light of the whole purpose of missions can help resolve it. The purpose of missions is not just to do service and help someone survive economically or physically. Service might be one way that Christ’s love is demonstrated, but it is not the end goal. The goal is spreading God’s Word and giving glory to Him, meaning that shoveling money into the receiving country is not enough to fulfill the purpose of missions: forming relationships with people is also key to being able to spread God’s Word. With that in mind, short-term mission teams do seem valid, not necessarily because they are best way to alleviate poverty, but because, when done well, their presence provides opportunities for people to learn about Christ and His saving grace.

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<sup>33</sup> Barnes, “The Changing Face,” 379.

<sup>34</sup> Livermore, *Serving*, 95.

3. *“Short-term missions helps participants grow spiritually.”*

Another reason that many people participate in short-term missions is for their own spiritual growth. Regardless of whether or not the participant ever returns to the mission field or not, many think that a short-term mission trip can be a positive way for people to grow closer to God, and they envision returning to the United States “on fire” for God. Youth leaders cite missions as something that helps young people better understand their faith<sup>35</sup> and say that the reason they love short-term missions is “not as much for the impact they make on the foreign mission fields as for their ability to transform the lives of the [short-term] missionaries and for the effect these transformed lives can have at home.”<sup>36</sup> Christians of all ages can grow spiritually and emotionally through a short-term missions experience.

On the negative side, there are “a growing number of researchers” who wonder if short-term missions is a very effective discipleship tool, because “some studies demonstrate that while participants come home with lofty aspirations of buying less, praying more, and sharing Christ more, within six to eight weeks, most resort back to all the same assumptions and behaviors they had prior to the trip.”<sup>37</sup> According to these studies, perhaps more work needs to be done in this area so that the potential spiritual growth for participants is increased.

4. *“Short-term missions develops long-term missionaries.”*

For most of Christian history, missionaries committed their entire lives to serving God through missions. Because travel to a foreign place took weeks, months, or even years, it seemed foolish, costly, and time-consuming to travel for so long, only to decide that missions was not the person’s call. With the onset of short-term missions, however, potential missionaries are able to “try-out” missions through a short-term experience. In many cases, a short-term mission trip is the first opportunity for a Christian to even consider doing long-term mission work. Short-term

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<sup>35</sup> Jerry Reed, Steve French, Paul Hansen, and Bob Johnson, “Youth Worker Roundtable: Are Youth Mission Trips Biblical?” *Youthworker* 6, no. 2 (1989): 43.

<sup>36</sup> Mary McMahon, qtd. in Scott Meier, “Missionary, Minister to Thyself: The Real Reason Behind Mission Work,” *Youthworker*. 17, no. 5 (2001): 28.

<sup>37</sup> Livermore, *Serving*, 54.

missions can provide a great opportunity for potential missionaries to explore God's call to long-term missions.

Out of all the study that *has* been done about short-term missions, its influence on long-term missionary recruitment is probably the topic that has been most documented statistically. The results of various studies seem to indicate that the short-term missions movement has not increased the actual number of long-term missionaries going into the field. As the number of people participating in short-term missions has skyrocketed, the total number of long-term missionaries has remained static or has even decreased slightly.<sup>38</sup>

Based on this information, some claim that short-term missions has been detrimental to the recruitment of long-term missions.<sup>39</sup> Those results do not necessarily indicate that the short-term missions movement is taking workers *away* from serving as long-term missionaries, however, because it is possible that the number of long-term missionaries might have declined anyway, regardless of short-term missions activity. In this case, perhaps short-term missions might have kept the number of career missionaries from dropping even more, since there are a significant number of long-term missionaries who choose a career in missions because of a short-term missions experience. Already in 1986, about half of all new career missionaries had previous short-term missions experience,<sup>40</sup> and 20 years later, in 2006, Mays estimated that "almost all new long-term missionaries have been on one or more [short-term] mission trips."<sup>41</sup> Short-term missions is changing the way that long-term missionaries are recruited.

##### 5. "Short-term mission trip participants are good 'tellers' and 'senders.'"

Even if they never return to the foreign mission field, short-term mission participants can be excellent informers and supporters of missions in the United States, and can create an increase

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<sup>38</sup> Frampton F. Fox. "Screwtape on Summer Missions," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 39 (2003): 483; Guthrie, *Third Millennium*, 88; Mays, "Six Challenges," 313; Don Parrott, "Managing the Short-term Missions Explosion," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40 (2004): 357.

<sup>39</sup> Parrott, "Managing," 357.

<sup>40</sup> Pocock, "Long-term Mileage," 155.

<sup>41</sup> Mays, "Six Challenges," 312.

in continued prayer and monetary support from the sending church for long-term missionaries on the field or for the receiving culture. Many mission trip participants return home with a newfound commitment to some type of life change as a result of their trip. They might decide not to spend money at Starbucks each morning, but will instead donate that money to support a child in the impoverished nation they just visited. Others might form a missions prayer team within their youth group to meet weekly and pray for missionaries around the world.

Participants have seen first-hand what needs to be done, and their stories can often reach friends, family, and church members in the United States much more effectively than a long-term missionary who does not have the same direct connection to a congregation. One writer calls short-term participants “informed senders,” saying that “they spend a lifetime serving in their local church, praying, giving, and infecting their family and friends with world vision.”<sup>42</sup> These “informed senders” are able to tell their congregations how to pray, because they have specific names and needs rather than simply a vague, general prayer request for a career missionary on the church prayer list, and they are also able to encourage others to continue to support missionaries and their work financially. When it comes to “creating hearts burdened for the task” of supporting a specific cause, “there simply is no substitute for hands-on ministry.”<sup>43</sup>

On the negative side, sometimes reports about the impact of these “informed senders” can be inflated. While short-term participants can help raise money to send back to their trip location, it can be difficult for them to know the real needs of a community in a foreign country after a brief two-week trip there. Also, churches often claim that their church missions budget is increased due to their participation in short-term mission trips, but this often is simply an indication that they paid for the relatively high costs of sending people on short-term mission trips, and not an indication that their overall support for mission work in general has increased. Mays writes, “I have never heard anyone say that their church’s regular missions budget (outside of giving for mission trips) has grown because of their mission trips. It is clear, however, that an

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<sup>42</sup> Pocock, “Long-term Mileage,” 155.

<sup>43</sup> Moreau, *Introducing World Missions*, 247.

increasing proportion of many missions budgets is going to help support the trips.”<sup>44</sup> While reports are sometimes inflated about the benefits of short-term missions for the overall support of missions, short-term missions can be a positive way to create “informed senders” and supporters of missions.

6. *“Short-term missions enables laypeople to be directly involved in carrying out the Great Commission.”*

One of the revolutionary things about short-term missions is that it does not require extensive training for participants. There is often a mindset that long-term career missionaries are “super Christians” and that they have been chosen by God for a special purpose that no one else could possibly fulfill. This comes in part because most long-term missionaries spend weeks, months, or even years preparing for their work on the mission field through college or seminary degrees in missions or special training in language, culture, and theology. This training is certainly valid for career missionaries, but it sometimes causes non-missionaries to believe that they are exempt from doing mission work.

The short-term missions movement has been extremely empowering for laypeople by showing them their role in the priesthood of all believers, meaning that all Christians, not just professionally trained ones, are able to serve God’s kingdom. In short-term missions, nearly any Christian can be a participant in mission work. Barnes writes that “in years past, lay people were expected to give and to pray, to be senders, not goers. Currently, however, a growing number of would-be missionaries are exploring creative ways in which they can be involved in missions.”<sup>45</sup> He says that “no longer is the mission field viewed as the province of an elite few. Increasingly, ordinary lay people are finding that they can be empowered to contribute to the missions enterprise with their time and talent.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mays, “Six Challenges,” 313.

<sup>45</sup> Barnes, “The Changing Face,” 377.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

There are a few negatives to this reality, however. At times, the emphasis on “no training needed” can go too far, resulting in unequipped short-term mission participants. While they may not spend years pursuing a seminary degree, short-term mission participants need basic training before their missions experience – something that is often overlooked in short-term missions.

A related issue is the concept of short-term missions as an inoculator. Some short-term participants are motivated to go on a short-term mission trip out of a sense of obligation. They participate in one trip, and after it is over, they feel they have fulfilled their duty, and they are inoculated against any desire to do mission work again. They believe that they did it once, so that is enough. Just as a vaccine injects just enough of a virus to make it powerless, a one-time mission experience can give people just enough of missions that they no longer feel the call to do missions. Because they “did their time,” they believe they are done with mission work, whether that is work overseas or mission work in their own community.

7. *“Short-term missions is exciting! It provides a great opportunity for participants to see a new, exciting place, eat new foods, meet new people, and purchase great souvenirs.”*

This is a motive for short-term missions that usually is not blatantly publicized, but it is often an implicit partial motivation that many participants have in conjunction with a desire to help others and accomplish some of these other listed goals. This is seen in the people who are excited about the chance to try exotic culinary dishes and try out a foreign language. Participants look forward to the opportunity to share their faith, but they are also enthusiastic about seeing a historic monument within the country they are visiting.

This motivation is often most evident in short-term mission participants after they return home. Their official reports back to financial supporters generally focus on the “spiritual things:” how many people were converted to Christ, how the team made an impact on the local church, and how much the participant learned about prayer. In face to face conversation, though,

“the adventure of life in a new place seems to be the emphasis.”<sup>47</sup> This motivation is what causes some to call short-term missions participants “vacationaries.”

One short-term missions participant encourages others to participate because of “the romanticism of it. Going off to New Guinea or Japan or Eastern Europe for a summer is pretty exciting! Short-term missionary work presents a colorful alternative to everyday options. Sometimes it’s a matter of getting out of a rut and seeing things from a different perspective.”<sup>48</sup> The issue is not that having fun on a mission trip is bad, or that God cannot give some people a sense of adventure so that they enjoy traveling to distant and different lands to spread His Word. Nevertheless, if a person’s motivation for doing “missions” is getting a new stamp in his passport, or eating exotic food and getting experience speaking a foreign language, then the question that must be asked is: is this truly serving the “global advancement” of Christ’s kingdom?<sup>49</sup> Christians need to be cautious about what they call “missions.” There is nothing wrong with travel and adventure, and Christians can be encouraged to go on vacations and see the world, but if the purpose is adventure, and not missions, then it should not be called a “mission trip.” As Christians visit the Eiffel Tower in Paris or hike the Inca Trail in Peru, they can and should be “missional” and “always be looking for ways to call people to follow Jesus. But let’s beware of taking what ought to be modus operandi for all of us every day as Christians and suddenly calling it a ‘mission project.’”<sup>50</sup> Adventure in itself is not a negative part of short-term missions, but labeling a sightseeing tour as “missions” can be negative, as it detracts from the goals of short-term missions.

8. *“Short-term missions encourages long-term missionaries on the field and can help support those missionaries by meeting a specific need.”*

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<sup>47</sup> Livermore, *Serving*, 50.

<sup>48</sup> Gene Smillie, “My Story: Take the Short Step,” *Urbana*, [http://www.urbana.org/\\_articles.cfm?recordid=273](http://www.urbana.org/_articles.cfm?recordid=273) (accessed March 1, 2008).

<sup>49</sup> Livermore, *Serving*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

Many long-term missionaries love to have short-term teams come to their area and are very supportive of the short-term mission effort. Short-term mission teams can help raise awareness of the mission or church that they are visiting simply by their presence as foreigners. Short-term teams can meet a specific need for a long-term missionary, like providing the manpower and funding to build a new church fellowship hall or running a Vacation Bible School program. Long-term missionaries can also find great encouragement in simply having someone visit them from their country of origin and show that someone cares about the missionary's work; in a ministry where discouragement and loneliness is prevalent, this can be a huge boost in energy and enthusiasm for the continued work of the long-term missionary.

On the other hand, a short-term mission team often means more work for the long-term missionary hosts. Along with their encouragement and enthusiasm, short-term mission teams can bring grumbling first-time travelers, people naturally insensitive and unaware of cultural issues, and the need for the long-term missionaries' time. Jerry Reed, a former missionary, says, "When we heard that mission groups were coming down for two or three weeks, we'd almost groan. More often than not, mission teams from the States disrupt things.... You might say [long-term] missionaries are more useful to stateside churches than mission teams are to career missionaries."<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that short-term mission teams are not beneficial for long-term missionaries, but simply an acknowledgement that short-term participants can sometimes be a burden to long-term missionaries, and the participants' presence there not always a total, self-sacrificing act of service on behalf of the long-term missionaries.

#### 9. *"Everybody else is doing it."*

United States church leaders are especially guilty of doing short-term missions because of its popularity alone. There can be a "cyclical effect" to popularity: as people participate in short-term missions, they return and tell others about it, so others participate, which increases its

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<sup>51</sup> Reed, "Youth Worker Roundtable," 45.

popularity exponentially again.<sup>52</sup> A youth group leader hears that the church down the street had a successful mission trip to South America, and it sounds like a good idea, so the youth group leader plans a trip to a neighboring country the following summer.

In itself, this is not a terrible problem. There is something positive about popularity and sharing good ideas with others in the same field. On the other hand, when someone jumps into short-term missions without doing proper research and preparation, but instead just does it because someone said to, that can be a problem. The other issue at stake with this “fad mentality” comes from the very definition of a fad: at some point, its popularity will dwindle, which means people will stop doing it. If short-term missions is truly a positive way to do missions, then it would be unfortunate if it disappears just because it is no longer in vogue.

#### The Focus of Short-term Missions: Participants vs. Receivers

Besides the Biblical foundation for short-term missions, and the practical reasons that are often given for participating in it, a third topic is involved in a discussion of the rationale for doing short-term missions: its focus. Missions, by nature, centers primarily around changing the lives of people,<sup>53</sup> and it always has. All of the reasons for short-term missions listed above reflect that emphasis, focusing on the receivers, the participants, missionaries on the field, and the church leaders back home. While missions has always focused on people, short-term missions is extremely unusual because it places a heavy emphasis on the mission trip participants, which is a “drastic change from what we’ve historically emphasized in missions.”<sup>54</sup> Moreau writes that “the primary purpose [of short-term mission trips] is much more clearly focused on what they will do for the spiritual growth and worldview of the participants rather than on the strategic contribution they will make to the Lord’s work where they are going.”<sup>55</sup> Over half of the reasons described above focus on the short-term mission participant, which reflects the overall focus of modern short-term missions. This change in focus has happened

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<sup>52</sup> David Livermore, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Livermore, *Serving*, 48.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> Moreau, *Introducing World Missions*, 254.

relatively recently. Aaron Palmatier, a missionary in Mexico that has been hosting short-term teams for most of his career, says, “In the last twenty years the spirit of the visiting groups has changed also. Today they are much less concerned about the impact they will have in Mexico and more concerned about the impact Mexico will have on them.”<sup>56</sup> Marshall Allen, concludes that “[short-term missions] may be the first missions movement in church history that’s largely based on the needs of the missionary.”<sup>57</sup>

One of the biggest debates going on in the world of short-term missions today is whether this emphasis on the participants is valid. Scholars wonder who the primary focus of short-term missions should be: the receiver or the participant. This debate has polarized the short-term missions world. On one side, many scholars and church leaders agree with the inward focus on the benefit of the participant- the United States Christian going on the mission trip. Youth ministers talk about the opportunity for participants to become world Christians by having a “broader view of the world in which we live”<sup>58</sup> and by “deepen[ing their] conceptions of life, God, and people.”<sup>59</sup> They also view mission trips as a wonderful way for participants to grow closer to God.

This emphasis shapes the goals and purposes of many short-term missions programs. One church youth worker comments, “Our primary goal should not be to help the poor. That will happen, but our primary goal should be to help our teens see Jesus Christ and his kingdom in a new way. Mission experiences make that happen by taking our students out of their comfort zones and helping them appreciate the blessings and talents they’ve received.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Robert Bland, director of Teen Missions International, says, “We tell our people... we’re building kids, not buildings. The purpose isn’t just what we’ll do for these people, but what [the

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<sup>56</sup> Palmatier, “Spring Break,” 228.

<sup>57</sup> Allen, “Divergence,” 42.

<sup>58</sup> Scott Meier, “Missionary, Minister to Thyself: The Real Reason Behind Mission Work,” *Youthworker*. 17, no. 5 (2001): 25.

<sup>59</sup> Chap Clark and Kara E. Powell. *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World*. (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties, 2006), 173.

<sup>60</sup> Meier, “Minister to Thyself,” 24.

locals] will do for us... There is not a single purpose in missionary work, but to us, [Building our kids] is the first purpose.”<sup>61</sup> Most of the scholarship that is done with short-term missions is related to the participants; very little focuses on the receivers.<sup>62</sup> Paul Borthwick calls this “missions for the benefit of me.”<sup>63</sup>

To be fair, most people do go with at least some level of selfless motivation and altruistic intentions. They believe that they are changing the lives of the recipients by building homes and churches, giving gospel presentations, and delivering necessary hygiene materials. At the same time, those selfless motivations are frequently far outweighed – often by the leaders of the trip – by an emphasis on the personal growth of the participant, the relational bonding with other team members, the “life-changing experience,” and, often, the fun photographs and neat souvenirs to take back home.

On the other side of the debate, there are missionaries and scholars that believe short-term missions, like long-term missions generally is, should be done primarily for the benefit of the nationals in the country. David Mays believes that the emphasizing the participant is a problem: “When we find ourselves ‘using’ missions as a tool for our own benefit, or doing missions in a certain way because it provides a means for personal involvement, rather than to accomplish something for Jesus in the world, we have gotten off course.”<sup>64</sup> Marshall Allen agrees, saying, “the emphasis many short-termers place on the life change of the missionary – as more important than the effect on the person being ministered to- is a fundamental shift of philosophy that many think is problematic.”<sup>65</sup>

The unfortunate effect of this debate is that it has forced people to take extreme sides. Most people consider themselves in one camp or the other, with little middle ground. In reality, however, it seems as though the best way to do short-term missions needs to focus on both sides.

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<sup>61</sup> Allen, “Divergence,” 41; Livermore, “Cultural Intelligence,” 4.

<sup>62</sup> For one example, see Beckwith, Ivy. “Youth Summer Missions Trips: A Case Study.” Ph. D. diss., Deerfield, Ill.: Trinity Evangelical School, 1991.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Borthwick, qtd. in Livermore, *Serving*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Mays, “Six Challenges,” 313.

<sup>65</sup> Allen, “Divergence,” 41.

The benefits to participants and receivers do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. The Apostle Paul demonstrates this idea through his words in Romans. He describes how he hopes that, through his mission work in Rome, both Paul as the missionary and the church as the receivers will be “mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.”<sup>66</sup> Focusing too strongly on only the participants or only the receivers seems to cause problems, but short-term missions that is focused on both sides can be beneficial to all involved.

### **Recommendations for Short-term Missions**

Short-term missions is a complex topic, but studying it can help people find ways to do short-term missions effectively and in accordance with the Gospel. People involved in short-term missions need to also be involved in the continual improvement of it. Barnes describes this, saying “The first car ever made was full of imperfections and bugs. Did its producers scrap it? No, they kept on improving it by making new models. So it is with short-term missions.”<sup>67</sup> The following are some practical recommendations for short-term mission trip leaders and participants as they seek to “improve it by making new models.” These recommendations aim to help people do short-term missions in such a way that it is effective and benefits both the receiver *and* the participant.

#### *1. Train short-term mission participants before their trip.*

Unfortunately, many short-term mission participants do not receive any training in missions before their mission trip. Training and preparation beforehand benefits everyone involved. Through education about culture in general, and especially about the culture on the receiving end of the trip, participants can begin to develop their cultural sensitivity and can increase the impact they will have on the receivers. Training can also help participants nurture their spiritual growth, prepares potential long-term missionaries for their experiences, and teaches people about missions. Depending on the situation, training can take place in different

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<sup>66</sup> Romans 1:12.

<sup>67</sup> Barnes, “The Changing Face,” 378.

formats, for example, as a weekly class for several months before the trip, or as a three day intensive training session at the beginning of the trip.

### 2. *Partner with nationals in the receiving country.*

Some of the problems with short-term missions, like the existence of unnecessary work projects, stem from a lack of relationship between the short-term mission team and a national church in the country where the short-term mission is taking place. Most short-term missions scholars are adamant that there needs to be a partnership between the short-term mission team and national churches in order for effective short-term mission work to take place. Ideally, national churches should be at the forefront, and they should be the ones suggesting a short-term mission team be involved in some way. Allen says, “Short-term trips are most effective when initiated by a local church to help sustain an already existing or envisioned local ministry.”<sup>68</sup> Livermore agrees, saying, “Consistently I hear [from short-term leaders], ‘Oh yes, we’re very committed to working with the national churches there. *We ask them if they want to be involved...* Maybe we should start by asking if *we* should be involved at all, and if so, how?”<sup>69</sup> Short-term missions teams should partner with national churches by asking that second question, rather than simply assuming that they are needed. Through this partnership, teams can be involved in more effective short-term mission work.

### 3. *Pursue meaningful missions experiences during the trip.*

Rather than settling for repainting a freshly painted church, mission trip leaders should intentionally pursue missions experiences that are meaningful for both the recipients and the participants. Trip organizers should work with their national church partners to develop projects that will benefit the receivers, rather than simply inventing something that may or may not actually help them. This not only serves the recipients, but the participants as well, as they see that their presence is truly making an impact in the lives of others. Research indicates that

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<sup>68</sup> Allen, “Divergence,” 45.

<sup>69</sup> Livermore, *Serving*, 94, emphasis added.

meaningful experiences especially supports potential long-term missionaries. Pocock says, “Significant ministry seems to be a key to later full-time career service.”<sup>70</sup>

4. *Implement an ongoing missions ministry rather than simply taking once a year trips.*

This recommendation is especially applicable to churches that take mission trips together (as opposed to some trips that are made up of participants from various churches around the country, gathered through a specific missions organization). Some churches label a two-week section of the annual church calendar “short-term mission trip,” and ignore missions the rest of the year. Churches should pursue an ongoing missions emphasis throughout the year through Bible classes, missions presentations, debriefing sessions for past trips, and support of missions through church ministries. As past short-term participants continue to participate in debriefing sessions and Bible studies, they can continue to grow spiritually, and potential long-term missionaries can continue to be developed. The passion for missions that participants had when they returned home can be maintained. Also, the “informed senders” that were created through the short-term mission trip can be utilized, as they develop and lead fundraisers and prayer groups for the people they encountered on their mission trip.

5. *Participate in local missions, not just foreign missions.*

Local missions is frequently overlooked as a way of being involved in missions. While there are certainly people in need, both economically and spiritually, all over the world, there are also people in virtually every community in the United States that need to hear the Word of Christ and need to experience His love. For various reasons, Christians are frequently much more willing to take a once a year trip to a foreign country than to commit to volunteering at a homeless shelter once a month.

While some suggest that local missions should be used as a training ground for world short-term missions,<sup>71</sup> the reason for doing local missions is more than just training. There is a theological idea called “moral proximity,” which means that people “have to live out a missional

<sup>70</sup> Pocock, “Long-term Mileage,” 158.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Borthwick, “Rethinking Youth Mission Teams: Still a Worthwhile Idea?” *Youthworker* 6, no. 2 (1989): 31.

[or] ethical responsibility among the needs closest to [them] first or it's hypocritical.... It's not [about] poor people in Mexico *or* Chicago... it's both."<sup>72</sup> Churches can be involved in housebuilding in Nicaragua, but they also can and should build homes through Habitat for Humanity in their own neighborhood. Participants can feed the homeless in South Africa, but they can also donate canned goods to their local food bank. In order to truly serve missions as a whole, Christians should be involved in missions both far away *and* close to home.

#### 6. *Continue academic scholarship and research in short-term missions.*

Without an abundance of scholarly literature about short-term missions, it is hard to do "quality control." There needs to be more discussion of short-term missions in the scholarly world. More books and articles about short-term missions need to be published that focus not only on logistics, but also on quality and evaluation. Currently, the nation's premier missions journals, like *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, sometimes publish entire volumes where short-term missions is not even mentioned. Short-term missions should be a regular topic in these journals, or perhaps a new journal should be developed, devoted entirely to short-term missions. If short-term missions is truly a "staple" of many youth programs, as many claim,<sup>73</sup> then journals for youth leaders, like *Group* and *YouthWorker*, should also devote a portion of every volume to training youth leaders in doing short-term missions well. Colleges and seminaries that train future missionaries and church workers also hold some responsibility in this area. In their discussion of missiology, and church work in general, short-term missions needs to receive more attention, because many church workers graduate without any training in short-term missions.

#### 7. *Seek excellence in short-term missions.*

In order to improve the quality of short-term missions, the people involved need to continue to aim for improvement. This involves diligence and dedication to doing short-term missions well. Seeking excellence requires time, and trial and error. It might mean writing goals for the short-term missions experience. It means evaluating motives. Before they begin,

<sup>72</sup> David Livermore, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Reed, "Youth Worker Roundtable," 42.

participants can ask themselves why they are going on this trip, and leaders can ask themselves why they are leading. They can evaluate if it is because of a sense of adventure, or because everyone else is doing it, or if it is because they want to serve God and others through their experience.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Any critical look at short-term missions risks going too far and discouraging participation in it. In an “updated” version of C.S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters* concerning short-term missions, Frampton Fox speculates about a conversation between two demons, in which Wormwood, one of the demons, says, “We must inspire more indigenous scholars to criticize [short-term] missionaries for their colonialism to the exclusion of the considerable damage that their sacrifice has done to our interests.” The demons go on to discuss how enough criticism might stop short-term missions altogether (something they view as positive, of course).<sup>74</sup> The demons’ comments provide an important reminder to those that closely examine short-term missions: the negatives of short-term missions should not cause people to become discouraged and disillusioned and give up.

Yes, there are flaws in short-term missions. Inexperienced trip leaders go without the right preparation, and participants join the team for the wrong motivations. Short-term mission teams make cultural blunders, complete unnecessary construction projects, and do not speak enough of the native language to say much more than “Where is the bathroom?” Teams embarrass their long-term missionary hosts and exhaust the national churches trying to work with the short-term participants. Participants spend far too much time thinking about their own needs – including needs for photos and souvenirs – than they do thinking about the people they are trying to serve, and although they return back home vowing to change their lives as the result of their short-term mission experiences, their lives are back to normal within a few months.

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<sup>74</sup> Fox, “Screwtape,” 482-489.

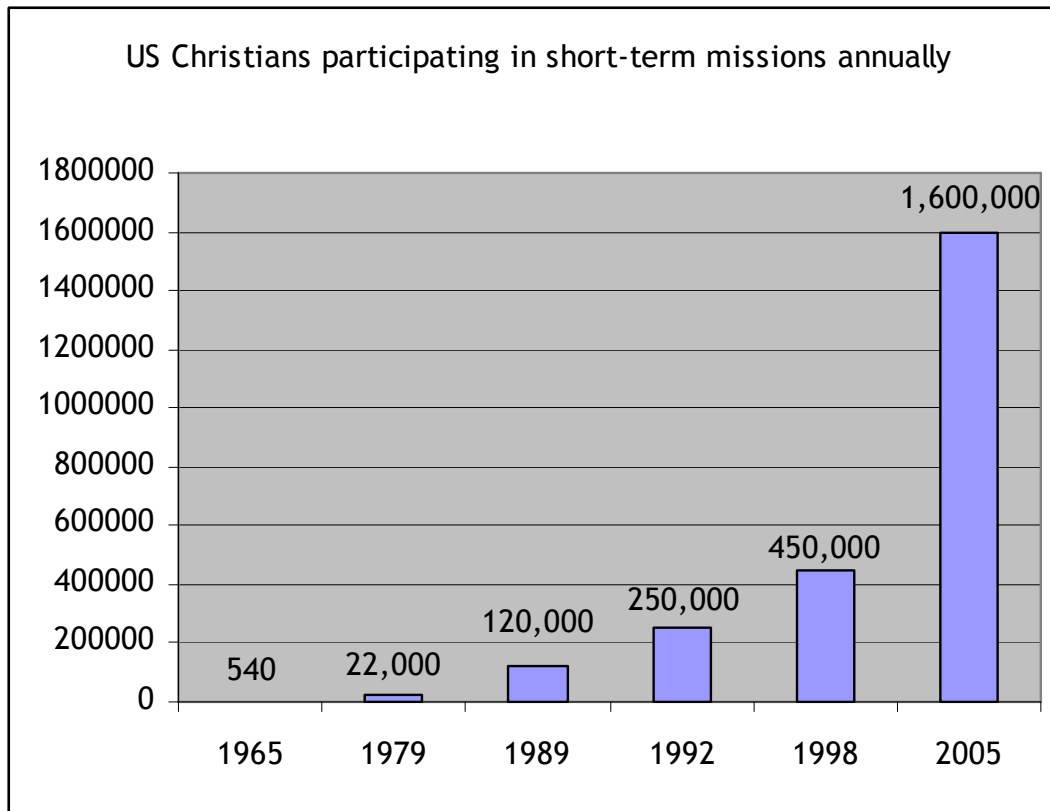
Yes, there are flaws in short-term missions, but in spite of all the mistakes that are made, God works anyway. Participants have the wrong motivations, but God uses them. Someone goes on a trip primarily because she wants to see the Great Wall of China, and God changes her heart to love the Chinese people. Leaders are unprepared to lead a short-term mission trip, but the team arrives home safely and happily at the end of the trip.

As God's people, let us strive to do His will with diligence and in a way that glorifies Him as we do short-term missions. Let us use our knowledge and intellect to study short-term missions and develop ways to touch people, using the knowledge He has given us. But in the meantime, let us not stop doing short-term missions. Let us not throw our hands up in the air and think, "If I can't do it well, I shouldn't do it at all." Instead, let us continue to seek improvement, but let us remember when we do not do short-term missions well, that God "chose the foolish things of the world" and "the weak things of the world" to serve Him.<sup>75</sup>

As short-term missions increases in popularity, thoughtful evaluation of it is more necessary than ever. Through careful examination of its origins and rationale, it is obvious that short-term missions is both Biblical and beneficial. At the same time, there is plenty of space for improvement in the way that short-term missions is done. Short-term missions warrants continued study and continued improvement, as God's people seek to spread His Word throughout the world.

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<sup>75</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:27.

Appendix One<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Statistics from: Guthrie, *Third Millennium*, 87; Daniel P. McDonough and Roger P. Peterson, *Can Short-term Mission Really Create Long-term Missionaries?* (Minneapolis: Stem Press, 1999); Livermore, "Cultural Intelligence."

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