

The 14-year-old “missionary”?!: Re-Thinking Short-Term Missions

The following includes some excerpts from David Livermore's new book, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Baker 2006).

Missions used to be the exclusive domain of seminary-trained professionals who studied cultural anthropology, raised support for months, and packed all their earthly belongings in a container. These professionals embarked on 25-30 year careers in other parts of the world and wowed us with unfathomable stories about snakes and natives. Missionaries were our super-heroes--the ultimate pinnacle in the hierarchy of Christian ministry.

Now days, a 14 year old can send out a few letters, raise the money to buy a plane ticket, and he's off to serve as a “missionary” for a couple weeks. And he isn't going alone! Nearly 1/3 of all American high school students participate in some kind of religious cross-cultural experience before they graduate from high school.¹ In fact, it's hard to be deemed a legitimate youth ministry these days without running a full-fledged, short-term missions program.

What's not to celebrate about missions being taken from a marginal group of people who seemed inaccessible to the rest of us and being given to a group of wide-eyed teenagers? Clearly many of us have experienced first hand some of the amazing opportunities that come with traveling abroad on a short-term mission trip.

However, a growing body of researchers, myself included, is raising some indicting questions about short-term missions. I'll tip my hand. I'm “for” short-term-missions. But I do think we need to put down our car wash placards and passports for a minute and re-think a few things. Let me just suggest a few cautions for our consideration.

1. Ask yourself why you're going.

Picture your youth group traveling down a tropical river with a few natives in tow. That's the image that accompanies a Teen Mania advertisement for their Global Expedition trips. The headline reads, “Missions should be fun.” You need not look far to see short-term organizers resorting to the theme of adventure and fun to recruit participants.

The more altruistic reasons for short-term missions are that these trips are life changing. They're said to be the ideal vehicle to help students identify materialism and to grow in their faith. “Expose kids to the needs of the world”, we're told, “And they'll be much more engaged in serving their own communities when they come home”.

The problem is, it isn't happening. While students come home with lofty aspirations of buying less, praying more, and sharing Christ more, within 6-8 weeks, most resort back to all the same assumptions and behaviors they had prior to going on the trip. And the number of career missionaries isn't increasing the way we were told it would. Worse yet, some students come home assuming poor people are doing just fine and are happy that way.

Might we be wise to use caution in how we talk about our trips? Are they “mission” trips if the primary intent is to change the lives of the “missionaries”? While missionaries have always been transformed by their engagement in mission, their transformation has never been the emphasis.

And what does happen on the receiving end? There are local churches serving faithfully long before we arrive and long after we leave. Are we truly serving their needs or just fulfilling our agendas? Consider the words of some African church leaders on the topic: “Please raise our dignity before the Christians and citizens of North America. We are not naive, backward, and ignorant black people. Instead we are your brothers and sisters in the family of God who are seeking to be faithful to his calling on our lives.”

Mission trips are fraught with potential when done well, but let's resist calling them the absolute best thing happening. And let's step back and consider how our reasons for doing them shape how they actually unfold.

2. Don't skip the De-Brief

A growing number of groups are spending more time preparing their groups with training and orientation before going overseas. This is an important step forward in the short-term missions fad. On the other hand, the confidence gained by learning about a culture needs to be tempered with an understanding that training only provides us with a peek into what makes a culture tick. The best kind of orientation will help us learn what kinds of questions to ask and will help us in slowing down in being too quick to make judgments about what we observe.

Several chapters of *Serving with Eyes Wide-Open* is devoted to helping leaders train their groups. I've adapted the fascinating field of cultural intelligence (CQ) to short-term missions. Don't let the sound of CQ scare you. It's a very useful framework that includes four different emphases (knowledge CQ, interpretive CQ, perseverance CQ, and behavioral CQ) that are proven to enhance our cross-cultural work, even for a couple weeks. It's particularly useful during the trip and upon your return.

Speaking of which, don't skip the de-brief!! If you have to choose between doing pre-trip orientation or post-trip debriefing, choose debriefing. Do both but during and after the trip are when groups are most ripe for actually translating the lessons learned into their everyday lives. The picture party is fine but find a way to keep incorporating ways to learn from your cross-cultural experience next week, next month, and next year.

3. Beware of drive-by missions!

One of the biggest criticisms I've heard again and again from Non-Western Christians about our short-term missions efforts is our tendency to blow in and out of a place without thinking about the long-term implications of our actions and even our very presence. Fortunately, more and more groups are developing long-term relationships and strategies and they keep going back to the same places rather than doing "drive-by missions".

Our tendency to blow in and blow out can surface in some other ways as well though. The tendency when in a foreign context is to immediately find something with which to compare it. So you'll often hear short-term participants talking about how something they observe compares to something at home or to another place they've traveled. There can be great value in finding commonalities as long as we aren't too quick to assume that those surface level similarities mean too much.

For example, we're often tempted to interpret familiar behaviors to mean the same things they mean back home. Listen to a youth group say things like, "They had virtually nothing but they were so happy. You could just see the joy all over their faces." It might just be that the people they encountered were responding nervously with smiles and laughter because they didn't know what else to do given the language barrier. But when operating in "drive-by" mode, it's tempting to rush to conclusions about what behaviors mean. The point is, we have to slow down and question our assumptions whenever working cross-culturally.

4. Stop Petting the Poor.

Closely related to the tendency to do drive-by missions is our tendency to turn the people we're serving into objects upon which we lavish our good will for a week or two. We take lots of pictures, feel good about giving them things, and fly home without really encountering the locals. That's what I mean by "petting the poor".

We need to resist running overseas to do things we aren't doing with people in our own neighborhoods. There are way too many stories of white, suburban youth groups who

love on Mexicans for a week, only to return to their local high school living in a white huddle and ignoring, or worse yet, demeaning their Latino classmates.

5. God is a lot Bigger than Your Short-Term Mission Trip

Finally, our mission trips are part of what God is orchestrating in his cosmic plan for the universe. That ought to be a word of encouragement to some of us and a word of caution to others of us. God is not dependent upon what we're going to do for him in the Dominican Republic but He graciously allows us to be part of how he extends his reign in places like that.

When we're discouraged, may we be reminded that God continually turns our most feeble attempts at living out mission into beautiful reflections of his glory. When we're tempted to overstate our role, may we be reminded that only God can turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Only God can use two weeks of sweating it out south of the border to change the life of a 14-year-old American kid. Meanwhile, God can mysteriously use that same 14 year old to be part of what he's doing to make himself known among all the nations.

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¹ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).