

Doing Short-Term Missions without Doing Long-Term Harm

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(4/15/08)

Given the explosion of Short-Term Missions (STM) trips to minister to low-income communities, it would appear that STM is the most effective way to minister to poor people. Right? Wrong! In fact, most STM trips violate basic principles of effective poverty-alleviation and have the potential to do considerable harm both to low-income people and to ourselves. However, by being cognizant of these principles and more intentional about our actions, the downsides of STMs can be reduced and there can be greater hope of long-term benefit for all involved.

PROVIDING RELIEF INAPPROPRIATELY DOES HARM

As discussed in the previous issue of *Mandate*,¹ one of the key principles for effective ministry in low-income communities is discerning whether the context calls for “relief,”—short-term handouts to people in an emergency situation—or “development”—walking with people over time in a way that brings reconciliation of foundational relationships with God, self, others, and creation. Relief and development are very different sorts of interventions, requiring different skills, approaches, human and financial resources, and time. It is not always easy to discern which intervention is appropriate, but a good rule of thumb is to ask yourself the following question: Are the people in this community capable of helping themselves? If the answer is “yes,” then relief is not the right intervention. For example, the Good Samaritan appropriately provided relief to the man who was bleeding on the side of the road and completely helpless. But most low-income people are not in this situation and are suffering from chronic issues that affect their self-image and sense of purpose. Such feelings of inferiority, hopelessness, and meaninglessness cannot be overcome by handouts from a STM team or anybody else.

Unfortunately, STM trips often make the serious mistake of providing relief in contexts in which development is the appropriate intervention. Providing handouts of goods and services in such a situation can do enormous damage by undermining the willingness and capacity of low-income communities to be stewards of their own human and physical assets. Doing relief in a development context isn't just ineffective; it's damaging!

EMPHASIZING NEEDS INSTEAD OF ASSETS DOES HARM

STM trips also tend to use “needs-based” rather than “asset-based” approaches.² Instead of focusing on the gifts and abilities that God has placed in low-income communities, the implicit assumption of many STM trips can be, “We must come in and build houses for you, because you don’t have the materials or know-how to do so yourselves. You need us to show you how to run Vacation Bible Schools in your community because we know more than you do.” This “needs-based” approach exacerbates the feelings of inferiority that are rampant in many low-income communities and can inflate the sense of superiority of the STM teams. In addition, these assumptions are not always true! There really are gifts and assets in low-income communities that the poor can use to improve both their lives and ours!

For example, when we send in our pastors on STMs to train churches in low-income communities, we should allow the churches in those communities to share with our pastors the ways they have seen God working in their midst. Churches that are dealing daily with issues such as witchcraft, demon possession, starvation, AIDS, and ethnic cleansing have often experienced God’s work in ways that are different from our experiences, and we need allow these churches to share with us what they have learned about God so that the entire body can be built up.

Indeed, the key asset that God has placed in many low-income communities is His body, bride, and fullness: the local church! Every STM team should ask itself: What are we doing to the testimony of the local church that already exists in this community? The reality is that often the local churches in poor communities cannot compete on the same stage with U.S. suburban churches in terms of their ability to put on a glitzy program. When STM teams come in with an abundance of resources and glossy Vacation Bible School materials, they look better and are often more attractive than the local church. STM teams need to ask: How can we be less on the front stage and more supportive of the local church and its ministry?

LEARNING FROM THE POOR AS SERVICE TO THE POOR

Despite these words of caution, STM trips can play a positive role in the lives of all those involved, but a different paradigm is needed. Rather than going as “doers,” some powerful dynamics can be unleashed if STM teams go as “learners” from the poor or as “co-learners” with the poor. Consistent with an asset-based model, going as a learner emphasizes the gifts which

poor people have to share with others: the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social resources that God has already placed in their community. Listening to poor people and asking them to share their insights affirms their dignity and reduces the tendencies towards pride on the part of the outsiders. Furthermore, the poor really do have something to teach us, for they have unique insights on what it means to trust in a sovereign God to “give us this day our daily bread.”

WHAT TIME IS IT?

An important dynamic that affects the interaction of STM teams and low-income communities is that there are often core cultural differences with respect to time. Most Americans are from a *monochronic* culture which believes that time is a very important resource that should not be wasted. Of course, there is some good in that perspective, and it enables Americans to produce a lot. But many other cultures have a *polychronic* view that says time is primarily an opportunity to invest in relationships. In such cultures, knowing and serving others is more important than pursuing many new projects or activities. Hence, people from polychronic cultures may not feel unduly impatient or burdened if life unfolds a little bit slower than the people from monochronic cultures would like.

STM teams that fail to understand these dynamics can inadvertently undermine long-term development. For example, when Americans gain a reputation for needing to do things very quickly, it can foster an attitude in poor communities that discourages local people from doing things to improve their own situation. Locals start to say, “We don’t need to do anything. Let’s just wait and some outsiders will show up and do it for us!” Again, if the STM teams would focus less on “doing” and more on “being and learning together,” this problem could be mitigated.

SOME CONCRETE STEPS TOWARDS GOING AS LEARNERS

As churches shift their paradigm from “going as doers” to “going as learners,” there are some specific steps they can take to create a more effective STM program.

First, it might be useful to change the name of these trips from “Short-Term Missions” to something that implies less about what the team will do to fix the poor and more on what will happen to the team as a result of the experience. Many now prefer the term “Vision Trip” to indicate that the team is going with the purpose of getting a larger view of the world and of

God's work in it. Similarly, some churches are using the term "Transformational Travel" to indicate that the trip is about God changing the lives of the team members rather than about the STM team doing something for others.

Second, the STM trip must be seen as one small part of a wider learning process that includes both pre- and post-trip training.

The pre-field training should include a reflective process that asks questions such as: "What is the nature of poverty? What does it take to alleviate poverty? What is the difference between relief and development and which of these is appropriate for this context? What is God already doing in this community? Who are my brothers and sisters there? What issues are they facing? How does this trip fit into the overall picture?" This reflective process goes far beyond learning a song or a few phrases in Spanish!

Research is demonstrating that post-trip training is essential for the STM trip to have positive, long-term impacts on the team members. This training involves much more than a church presentation two weeks after the trip or getting the team together for a reunion one month after their return. It is an intentional and on-going learning process that *lasts at least a year* and carefully examines "next steps" for both the individual and the sending church.

¹ See the article, "**Relief and Development: The Distinction is More Than Academic**" by Steve Corbett and Dr. Brian Fikkert, Mandate 2007, Issue No. 3.

² For a description of the difference in these two approaches, see the article "**What's Right with You?**" by Dr. Brian Fikkert, Mandate 2008, Issue No. 1.