

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Missions and the Stewardship of Western Missions Money

C. Philip Slate

Missions Consultant
North Boulevard Church of Christ
Murfreesboro, TN 37130
E-mail: cpsmissions@juno.com

Introduction

Although short-term evangelistic efforts, as contrasted with long term, career missions, are relatively new, they are likely here to stay. North American Protestants point to 1945 as the beginning date of short term, campaign type work when the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Church became the major initiator of that type of effort (Long, p. 17). As for Churches of Christ, Barney Morehead claimed "the first planned campaign of this generation" occurred in 1929 when Mr. & Mrs. S. P. Pitmann from Nashville visited Japan, joined six American missionaries and fifty Japanese Christians in Ota, distributing tracts, engaging in personal evangelism, and preaching on the street" (Brewer 1966). During the 1940s and 1950s Andy T. Ritchie, Jr. led student campaigns from Harding College to Northeastern USA and Canada. Otis Gatewood claimed in my hearing that the 1961 campaign in London, England was the first full-fledged effort outside the USA consisting of and conducted primarily by American personnel. Even then, in the early 1960s, the vast majority of the people we called missionaries, and the work done outside the USA, involved much more long-term work than short-term efforts. But since the 1960s the situation has changed drastically for both Churches of Christ and Evangelicals.

In the 1960s "a Chandler survey of 85 predominately evangelical mission boards disclosed that in 1965 only about two percent of their personnel were considered short term (appointments usually between three months to two years)." By 1970 the percentage had increased to over 10%. To be specific, in 1965 there were 580 persons involved in short term missions, but by 1970 their number had increased to almost 4,000. At the same time long term personnel experienced a slight decrease. By 1973 short term personnel comprised between 10% and 12% of the total work force of 118 USA mission boards that made short term appointments (Long, p. 17). In the first twelve years of the Evangelical Missions Quarterly (1964-1976), no less than twenty articles on short-term missions appeared. From 1979 to 1989 the number of short-term workers increased 600%, from 20,000 to 120,000 (Maust, p. 15). By the mid-1980s it was estimated that among the Evangelicals over half of the overseas personnel were short termers. The number of organizations, which promote short-term missions, grew in the 1980s from a dozen or so to 450 in a short period (Maust, p. 18). It is to be noted, however, that some missions boards do not appoint short-term people. However that may be, in addition to North American efforts, short term work is now being done by evangelicals from Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, Guatemala, Brazil, South Africa, and other countries (Long, p. 16). Many organizations have sprung up which specialize in short term work, like the STEM Ministries in Minneapolis.¹ Various publications now available are designed to assist people in short-term work. These include training manuals for both visiting workers and hosts. Wise or not, welcome or not, thousands of people and millions of dollars are involved in short-term missions.

As for Churches of Christ, in 1973 they could count 1,623 active missionaries (Dayton, p. 197). The most recent count by Churches of Christ indicated that there were just over 1000 long term missionaries sent out from the USA. By contrast, in an average year there may be as many as 6,000 or more persons from Churches of Christ in the USA who raise funds from churches and individuals to go on short term missions trips. When we combine the students from the Christian Colleges and

¹ STEM has produced two research documents: "Is Short-Term Mission Really Worth the Time and Money?" (1989-91) and "Can Short-Term Mission Really Create Long-Term Career Missionaries?" (1995-99). Order from STEM Ministries, P. O. Box 290066, Minneapolis, MN 55429.

Universities who raise money from churches and individuals, preachers who go on preaching trips to India, the hundreds who go to the Former Soviet Union annually, and the very large number of young and older people who go to Belize, Mexico, Honduras, the West Indies and the British Isles, the number easily reaches 5,500 to 6000 or more. In other words, Churches of Christ may have six times as many people involved in short term missions as in long term missions. How should we think about this? Are any changes called for as a result of this situation? Is this an unjustifiable imbalance in expenditure of Western missions dollars? This paper is designed to answer some of these questions.

Short Term Missions will continue

Short-term missions by members of Churches of Christ in the USA are likely to continue. Several reasons account for this, and they are worth noting.

1. *Some very good works are by nature short term and should be continued.* (a) In some cases a great need exists for short term, focused training, which can be provided by specialized visiting teachers from outside the country. Properly planned, such teaching is a useful supplement to the on-going training provided by local workers. (b) The Let's Start Talking and World English Institute programs are designed to assist local churches by, among other things, making contacts for them and providing initial Bible instruction. That has proven to be useful in many countries, given the worldwide desire to learn English. (c) Conducting summer camps in areas where there are already churches is, in the nature of the case, seasonal and potentially useful. (d) Short-term work by dentists, optometrists and ophthalmologists, surgeons, and even primary health providers can be useful and valid to supplement meager local medical care.
2. *Where work is undertaken in limited access countries.* (a) When seasoned preachers and teachers travel to India to give instruction to English-speaking former Protestant preachers, that effort is important and valid. USA missionaries are not able to get long term visas for work in India, so short term work is the only option; or at least it is the easiest thing to do since obtaining long term visas is difficult or impossible. (b) The same may be said for work in various Muslim and Buddhist dominated countries. Spending short terms cultivating contacts and giving teaching to others is the only option available except the less personal broadcasts, Bible Correspondence Courses, and other literature. All of these have their places, but they all have limitations as well.
3. *Where the work is designed, among other things, to give people an introduction to missions with a view to turning short term into long term workers.* (a) This is one of the common purposes in leading college and university students on summer campaigns. However, it appears that not all leaders of these efforts work seriously to help students consider long term work. Believing this to be a potential investment in the future, my wife and I have for the past twenty years or so given some money to almost every student from five Universities who has asked us for financial help. However, we are now reluctant to give help the same student to go three or four times, except where the purpose of the trip is to provide significant help to the local church. A student does not need to have a low level missions experience, a cultural experience, three or four times at the church's expense or mine. When students work for their money or are sent by families, as the Mormons do, that is a different story. (b) Local churches often take both young and not so young people on trips with a view to sharpening their interests in world evangelization. It was reported a few years ago that a survey among young people in Texas revealed their most profound spiritual experience was "going on a missions trip." It appears such "missions trips" provide some encouragement and growth for young people, but it remains to be seen whether such experiences contribute to the pool of long term missionaries.
4. *Short-term work is the only option for people who are fearful of long term commitments to most things.* In a broad-based study several years ago Robert Bella and others discovered that in North American society a rather radical decrease in commitment to public causes and an increase in self-improvement had occurred (Bella 1996). People get married later. They become disenchanted with their occupations at a higher rather than did earlier generations and thus move from one job to another. Short-term missions are one option for them since it does not carry a long-term tag. This is both bad and good: bad because it arises from instability in society, but potentially good because short termers may become long termers with appropriate coaching and spiritual growth.

All of this means short term missions activities are not all failures. A significant level of criticism, however, is leveled at them by experienced missionaries and missiologists.

Limitations on Short Term Work and Workers

Not surprisingly, several missionaries and missiologists have been critical of the increasingly high volume of short-term workers and works. Thus, James Reapsome, long editor of Evangelical Missions Quarterly, refers to "The Peril of Drive-Thru Mission Work," pointing out that "speed compels people to jet into a country for a week or two and then jet home again. Their speed justified by both opportunities and convenience." He puts words to what he sees as common thinking: "It's easy. We can raise the money without too much difficulty, we don't have to take any courses in missions, we don't have to learn any foreign languages, and someone will be there to take care of us." He urges missions executives to get off the jets long enough to ask some pointed questions about what they are doing. "What trade-offs are we making for the sake of speed? At the very least, we need to evaluate the results and implications of our mad dashes for more drive-thru missionaries. The question is not, are they doing any good? Of course they are. But immediate good results by themselves ought not to curtail our search for some long-term consequences. The real question is, What kind of lasting results do we get from drive-thru mission work?" (Reapsome, p.30).

Others accuse short termers of going on a vacation at the expense of the church, and of taking up valuable time of the long term missionaries on the field. I have seen this happen in places where relatively small churches give far more of themselves to visiting campaigners than they gain from the effort. Benefits to the local church are not commensurate with the efforts they put into the campaigns by outsiders.

While I am convinced there is a place for both short term and long term workers, as in the commercial and educational worlds, it seems clear that short term workers and works have distinct limitations which they must accept and with which they must live, as do short term workers in industry and education. Here are some of those limitations.

1. *The difficulty of evaluation.* In campaigns people often report how many brochures were distributed, how many people attended public meetings, and even how many baptisms occurred. But unless we believe in "once saved, always saved," it is necessary to have more long-term evaluations. For example, a campaign was conducted in Scotland in the 1960s in which nearly thirty people were baptized. A year later only one person was attending the assemblies, the local preacher's son, and likely he would have yielded to Christ in time anyway. But it is often hard to make realistic evaluations of short-term work. It is one thing to report baptisms in a campaign, or for that matter, in local work; it is another thing altogether to ask two or five years later where those converts are. Anecdotal reports of isolated individuals hardly constitute the kind of evaluative evidence needed. But unless realistic evaluation of short-term work takes place one really does not know about their value.
2. *Where there are language and cultural differences between workers and local people the short termers can never penetrate the mind and heart of nationals, nor produce a good literature for them, like a long-term worker can.* This is the verdict of history.² Indeed, some long term workers, in spite of longevity on the field, fail to penetrate the heart and mind of the host culture, and thus content themselves to function for as much as two decades or more with little advancement on what they learned the first three or four years in the country. But given the best effort, short termers just do not have the time and exposure to get into the local culture at the needed level.
3. *It seems exceptional among ourselves for a group of short termers to be appropriately prepared for their task, sufficiently guided on the field, and adequately and spiritually debriefed after returning home.* The STEM organization has prepared training manuals for the short-term workers, those who will lead them, and for the local, host church. That sounds responsible, but most of our people, and others, seem to make only token preparations. It would seem appropriate for people who are approached for financial support to inquire what plans are in place for the preparation, supervision, and debriefing of short term workers.

² Works on Africa by Aylward Shorter and Adrian Hastings and on the Middle East by Kenneth Bailey and Kenneth Cragg can hardly be written by other than long term workers who have the skills to make the most of their prolonged observations and research.

4. *Trying to plant a new and viable church by short-term work alone is often frustrating and usually abortive.* It reminds me of Samuel Johnson's statement about women preachers. "Sir," he wrote to Lord Chesterfield in 1754, "a woman preacher is like a dog's walking on his hind legs: it is not done well, but you are surprised that it should be done at all."³ It seems clear that substantial churches are usually a result of sustained work by someone, even when begun through short-term workers. As far as the evidence indicates, the later powerful Antioch church was begun by "tentmakers" scattered by the persecution following Stephen's death (Acts 8:4; 11:19ff), but it was given strength through a year long ministry by Paul and Barnabas (11:25-26). Many churches can exist for ten or fifteen years, but that is not long enough for kingdom purposes. The verdict of history is that long term development of the church in a given area is the product of prolonged work by people who come to know the culture and the pressing needs of the society in which the church exists, and then to respond to them out of biblical roots (Latourette, pp. 64, 86, 113, 118; Slate and Granberg, pp. 24-51).
5. *Short termers do not produce Bible translations, contextualized literature, useful indigenous hymns, and a qualified indigenous leadership.* These critically important activities seem always to be the product of prolonged help by men and woman who put forth the requisite long term effort to penetrate the host culture and interact with it at a significant level. Responsible churches will see to it that, in addition to the support of short-term work, appropriate workers will take care of those elements, which contribute to stable, lasting churches and Christians. Having a vernacular Bible, appropriate literature, culturally acceptable hymns, and solid leaders are know to be critical to the welfare of churches.
6. *Short-term work may be less than effective because the host church is itself incapable of doing sufficient follow-up work.* I know cases where small churches in other countries eagerly invite campaigners to come in because, failing to make things happen themselves, they seek a boost from outside. They cherish the hope, perhaps in vain, that something will happen if a group of workers comes in for a week or two and stirs up the situation, makes things happen. But they may not know what to do with the new contacts made by the visitors. Their congregational lifestyle may, in fact, deter further work with the contacts. This is what happened to several of the Billy Graham campaigns in England, and it has happened with several Churches of Christ as well.

In brief, short-term workers cannot do everything, which needs to be done for the church to flourish and be stable in a new area. This does not mean short-term work is useless or inadvisable, but it does raise the question of stewardship of Western missions dollars.

Toward a Constructive use of Short Term Workers

Although it is not the chief purpose of this paper to guide the course of short term workers or to provide an overall program for them, I wish to suggest eight guidelines without which churches and individual may well question their financial involvement in short term missions.

1. Establish realistic goals. Short-term work must be circumscribed with provisions for their usefulness. Some goals are not realistic for short-term effort, as stated above. Thus, the goals should be on display when funds are being sought, and if called upon to do so, a defense for them should be available.
2. Select appropriate personnel. Some people are not appropriate candidates for certain types of short-term work. Age, health, spiritual maturity, and the ability to get along with others in a group are all factors of importance. Potential supporters of short-term workers deserve to know that those workers have been appropriately screened, just as they would expect of long-term workers. Yes, I know we cannot expect to have perfect people to go on short-term assignments. But we can take steps to prevent real problems. It can be hard to turn down some people, especially young people, but there are cases where that needs to be done.
3. Make suitable preparations for the defined tasks. This would include factors like cultural and regional orientation, the intended ministries themselves, and post-event relationships between workers and local people. Good things do not happen just because visitors are present for one week to two months. Workers need to be prepared spiritually and in terms of skills, relationships with people in the host culture, and what they are to do afterwards. For example, post-campaign

³ Letter to Lord Chesterfield, Feb. 7, 1754. Quoted in [Bartlett's Book of Quotations](#).

letters exchanged between local people and visiting short-term workers can be as valuable as what those workers do on site. At this point a distinction needs to be made between short-term works where the workers share the language of the host culture and where they do not. It is very helpful to coach campaigners on such matters as inviting people from other countries to "come and study in the USA." Most experienced missionaries are solidly against such activities, and for good reason. Unless they are guided appropriately, visiting short-term workers can cause a lot of difficulty.

4. Provisions for responsible on-site supervision and leadership. Keeping people focused, trouble shooting, and keeping up spiritual moral are critical to the short-term experience. Potential supporters of short-term works have a right to know that the leaders of the group are able to perform these tasks.
5. Plans to integrate the short term work with local, on-going work. I admire those leaders who limit their short-term efforts to places where they are invited by local churches. But this may be taken a step farther and ask whether or not the local church knows how to make use of the short-term effort. The local church might be in *greater* need of someone's coming to help them learn to do their own work in a better way. To put it another way, leaders of short-term efforts may have a responsibility to raise questions with local churches about their own nature and potential. That might be the most fruitful thing they can do.

Churches abroad, as well as in the USA, may be continuing to do things the same way all the time without getting legitimately expected results. That reminds me of that definition of "insanity", which runs, "Doing the same things over and over and expecting the results to be different." A single appropriate consultant or evaluator of a church might be needed much more than a group of twenty novice campaigners. In other words, the welfare of a local church should take precedence over the need to find a place to take a group of people on a campaign.

6. Maintain the spiritual and theological dimension of the work. If short-term work is to be justified at all--and the same may be said about long-term work--it must be carried out with an appropriate and conscious spiritual rationale. It must be kingdom work or it does not deserve to be supported financially. Both the short-term workers and the local church they seek to help should have a clear understanding of how the proposed effort will advance the kingdom of God.
7. Develop solid plans for post-event evaluations, which involve input from national Christians. I have known campaign leaders who have returned repeatedly to the same place with groups of short termers when they were not really wanted, but the national preachers and American missionaries felt their salaries would be jeopardized if they did not cooperate. I found this to be the case in 1999 when I did an evaluation of work in Guyana. Impressions by outsiders do not always accord with reality, so it is important to learn the impressions of discerning and wise nationals. They need the opportunity to respond in a candid and honest manner.
8. Deal with the issue of continuity. Will the short termers return to the same area or specialize in going to a large number of new places. Where short term work is justified, it will likely increase in effectiveness when the efforts are repeated and improved in the same cultural area. Frankly, I am not impressed by a campaign leader who boasts of large numbers of countries in which he has led campaigns. That really means he is increasing the number of places where he is a novice.

Stewardship of Western Missions Dollars

These eight guidelines may be used by short-term organizers to think through what they are doing, but they may also be used by potential supporters to evaluate their own stewardship of the money God has placed in their care. Jonathan Bonk has placed us in his debt by calling attention to the way in which the opulence of the West, and the vast amount of money available to churches and individuals, constitute great problems to missions efforts throughout the world (Bonk 1991, 1993). Bonk is concerned about the larger issues of using Western money in missions in such a manner that relationships with nationals are disrupted, if they exist in the first place; that control tends to come with financing; and that the philosophy behind the use of the money often comes across as non-Christian. Surely it must cross the mind of people in Haiti, Guyana, and other very poor countries in the Western Hemisphere how they could use the multiplied thousands of dollars involved in sending teen-agers on repeated trips to areas where their work contribution is negligible and they often seem giddy, non-serious and unspiritual. Visiting North Americans, hungry for familiar food after a week of local fare, can go to a nice restaurant and spend more money in an evening than many local heads of homes can earn in a week or more. But even this is not my chief concern, serious as it is.

If it is the case that North American Churches of Christ have six or seven times as many short term as long term workers, what does that indicate about financial allocations? While we all admit that we need both types of workers, which is most critical for long term benefits? I have in mind benefits like stalwart churches, leaders with real spiritual stature, a hymnody that nurtures the souls of nationals, appropriate programs to build future national workers, and a literature, which both builds up the local body and protects against the most pressing dangers to the local church? The answer to that question is clear enough. Where short-term workers do some of this it is accomplished by their repeated efforts in the same area.

Let me put it another way. Suppose 30 people pay \$2,500 each to go on a two-week campaign to another country. That is \$75,000, enough to furnish the annual salary for two full time American missionary families in many countries. Assuming the full time workers have appropriate training there is no question in my mind which expenditure would be the greatest benefit to the kingdom of God. If people pay their own way on such trips, that is their business, but if churches are paying for the trip they should re-think their stewardship of the funds supplied by conscientious Christians.

At one point, a brother very knowledgeable about work in the Former Soviet Union estimated that in the early 1990s over \$1m per year was being spent on campaigns in the FSU. But how many full-time workers could be supported with \$1m? To add to the problem, often there was little or no coordination among the various short-term groups, which came in. In one church in Moscow a succession of campaigns came in and, ignoring what their predecessors had done, succeeded in teaching the Book of Acts four times to the same congregation! In many cases in the FSU the majority of those baptized fell by the wayside because no one was there on a sustained basis to strengthen them in the faith. In another case, a more long-term worker in a FSU city was unable to get a list of contacts from visiting campaigners, even after following them to the airport! Churches and individuals that support such campaigns would do well to raise questions about their stewardship of kingdom funds. I know it is easier to go on a campaign than it is to learn Russian language and culture and move there on a more long-term basis, but that is precisely what was and is needed if the new converts in the FSU are to become stable and fruitful. I summarized some of these long-term failures in an article (Slate 1996), and churches will do well to work for more stable outcomes of their efforts.

It is the appropriate balance and strategic use of both part time and full time workers and works that are needed. I know of no way to manage that balance other than supporting/sponsoring churches' and individual Christians' becoming knowledgeable enough to ask the right questions. Leaders of short-term efforts must be responsible before the Lord in regard to the amount of money used in such efforts. In some cases, churches may need to make it a matter of policy that 80% or more of their budget go to support appropriately trained long term workers. This may also involve redoubling our effort to get more people trained to do responsible long-term work. Perhaps a part of our problem is spiritual, or theological. If so, then it becomes important to present on all sides the way in which the evangelization of the Gentiles is close to the heart of God. Hard thinking and diligent praying about the worldwide task can curb the quick-fix syndrome so characteristic of our society. The kingdom of God does not grow like a squash, but more like an oak. Short term work, though affordable by Christians living in a wealthy country, are not the answer to the greatest needs in the world. Drive-thru missions have limited benefits; MacWorld evangelism, while contemporary, is inconsistent with both New Testament teaching about evangelism and solid historical precedent.

Conclusion

Both individuals and churches are often unduly influenced by the culture in which they live. Churches and individuals that are skittish about long term commitments are a convenient combination to do short term work. That is not all bad; God can use it. But when we raise the larger kingdom questions about stability and depth among newly evangelized people, about the potential for being a movement within a country, the chances of becoming the kind of believers who last and thrive, it is critical that we achieve some kind of viable balance between short term and long term efforts.

Bibliography

Bonk, Jonathan

1991 Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

1993 "Mission and the Problem of Affluence," pp. 295-309 in Toward the 21st Century in Christian Missions, edited by James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Bella, Robert (editor), et al. al.

1996 Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Rev. ed. University of California Press.

Brewer, Charles R., editor

1966 "Barney Morehead" in Missionary Pictorial. Nashville, TN: World Vision Publishing Co.

Dayton, Edward, ed.

1973 Missions Handbook: North American Protestant Ministries Overseas. 10th edition. Monrovia, CA: MARC.

Maust, John

1991 "Summer Vacation." Latin American Evangelist (January-March).

Latourette, Kenneth Scott

1948 The Unquenchable Light. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.

Long, Meredith

1973 "The Increasing Role of Short-Term Service in Today's Mission," Mission Handbook: North American Protestant Ministries Overseas 10th ed.; Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1973. Pages 16-23.

Reapsome, James

1993 "The Perils of Drive-Thru Missions Work." Pulse (25 June 1993).

Slate, C. Philip

1996 "No Lasting Trace of Your Visit," Gospel Advocate cxxxviii:7 (July 1996):16-18.

Slate, C. Philip and Granberg, Stanley

1994 Reaching 'Russia' Abilene, TX: ACU Press.