



# SHORT-TERM MISSIONS DONE WELL

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## How Short-term Missions Can Play a Vital Part in Advancing the Gospel or Play a Part in Hampering the Long-term Work of Missionaries on the Field

When short-term mission trips are mentioned within Christian circles, opinions are bountiful. Such comments are, “It changed my life! / We were able to help so many people in need. / I could never do what the missionaries do. / Why do you go overseas when there is so much need here? / I think we should just send the money that we would spend to go there. / We personally led hundreds of people to Christ when we were there. / They couldn’t do it without us coming.”

Over the past 20 years, we have heard all of these statements. Most observations are from sincere followers of Christ and reveal a wide spectrum of opinion regarding short-term missions and discipleship. Many of us have heard of short-term mission teams going to serve a needy people group and ended up leaving the local missionaries a mess to clean up.

Not long ago, we had a missionary friend receive a church team from the States. The group spent two days in the village doing vacation Bible school where the missionary had begun to work. After the group left, it took him six months to correct the damage that team did by teaching false doctrine, disregarding the culture, and unwittingly insulting the people. All the while celebrating their work for the Kingdom! Naturally, our friend became very protective of the ministry and selective of teams he allowed to serve alongside him. Our friend invites certain churches to work several times a year because they understand what he needs and their role in the calling God has given him. He knows that when these groups come, they are prepared. They listen; they are sacrificial—knowing it’s not about them. They are not focused on an experience but representing Christ when they arrive. They are a blessing and not a burden.

We believe that short-term missions play a vital role in expanding God’s Kingdom in our world. However, short-term teams must be fully prepared before they board a plane for the adventure God has given them. That adventure is to be “on mission” with God, something that should be done in a far-off field as well as in our neighborhoods. We want to give you some basic steps to prepare for the mission field. The following list is based on years of wisdom and conversations with long-term missionaries. We are still learning, and we have learned the most from our own mistakes.

- 1.) Know your mission organization.

Starting in the 1980s, short-term missions organizations popped up like weeds in a garden. Christians were eager to experience the mission field, and as travel costs became manageable, ministries were birthed to meet that eagerness. Youth groups were quick to take their teens overseas as youth pastors used the trip to motivate teens to attend youth group, to memorize scripture, and hopefully catalyze their spiritual growth. Of course, those are great goals. Unfortunately, these types of mission organizations are often more concerned with the number of teams getting to the field rather than making sure teams are fully prepared to be on mission for God in a foreign context. Short-term mission experiences have turned into a

multimillion-dollar business, with teams visiting the same places over and over again, doing the same things over and over again. We refer to this as Christian tourism.

Mission organizations that originated to deploy long-term missionaries to foreign fields look at short-term missions through a difference lens. To them, short-term missions is not the driving force of their vision. Therefore, short-term missions work should happen only when missionaries need help with projects they cannot undertake on their own. Short-term trips are then based on invitation and relationship. Rather than the missionary serving the team, as is often the case with Christian tourism, the team understands the sacrificial and joyful nature of serving the missionary.

2.) Know your host culture.

Most enjoy culture to a certain extent. However, most North Americans only expose themselves to a different culture by eating at a Chinese or Mexican restaurant (which probably isn't native to that culture anyway!). Eating great food is a far cry from understanding the multi-dimensional variables that make up a culture. Another missionary friend paralleled learning about culture to peeling an onion. It has many layers and when trying to understand it, it will probably make you cry! This missionary has been in the Dominican Republic for many years and comments that she has barely begun understanding the culture. As we travel into a new culture, we must admit we don't understand the depth and uniqueness of each culture. We must allow the missionary and the people to teach us. *If we are unteachable, then we are unavailable.* This on-field training can be supplemented with pre-field training which includes doing research on the country and culture in which the team will serve. Though extremely limited, pre-field cultural training will help participants begin to correctly filter what they are sensing when they begin their work. Pre-field training allows great conversations to be had on-field.

3.) Know your missionary.

Missionaries on the field sacrifice much when answering the call on their life. Most missionaries will never mention these sacrifices because they don't see them as a sacrifice but a privilege. However, missionaries have feelings and can also get burned out. They need encouragement. They need time off. They need laughter. They need something from their hometown. Often when we are with our missionaries, we offer childcare so they can have a date night. We include them in our free day with the blessing of all expenses paid rest and relaxation. Know what personal needs and desires your missionary has and try to bless them when you are there. Remember, you are there to serve them and not for them to serve you.

4.) Know your missionary's ministry.

The missionary host you will be serving should have a vision for their ministry. Ask your missionary to do an online video conference with your team to describe their



ministry mission and vision. This will help you shape your team to work within that vision. It's possible that your team is not a good fit for the ministry. In that case, back out, but perhaps ask the missionary if there is someone else, they would recommend you work with. Remember, if you try to fit your team into a role it isn't gifted, the missionary will be forced to stop their rhythm of ministry to accommodate your team. The result is often a good experience for your team, yet no lasting fruit from your visit and an exhausted missionary. You must know the ministry you're partnering with, how your team is gifted, and the goal of your visit.

5.) Know your team.

As a pastor or lay leader of your mission team, you must know your team members well before you travel into a different culture. Pre-field training should include personal testimonies, background check, application with health background, spiritual training, team building, and understanding of talents and gifting. All of these items will help you as a leader to know your members. In pre-field training we can recognize the unique personality of our team as a whole. We can identify possible personality conflicts, potential health issues, as well as possible leaders and followers. God is actively involved in putting every missions team together. Knowing the makeup of your team can give you insight into what God might be focusing your team on as you deploy to the field.

6.) Know what Scripture says about missions.

It is important that we know what the Bible says about missions and why we go. Pre-field training should include a Bible study on missions. When we know what God says, it will help us align our purpose, our short-term team, our church, and our hearts with the mission of God to bring the Gospel to those who are perishing. The Gospel must always be proclaimed. Humanitarian efforts are good; people need physical needs to be met. But, if we simply believe that meeting those needs translates into eternal life for the recipient, we are sorely mistaken. We fall into offering the whole world, and they still lose their soul. Missions should include ministering to the mind, body, and soul.

Short-term missions, when done right, can play a vital part in advancing the Kingdom. Short-term teams must be properly prepared and trained. We pray that this article encourages you to step out in faith and ask God where He might be sending you, your church, and your mission team. We have people ask us many times, "when do you know if God wants you to go on a mission trip?" We tell them this, "When an opportunity for a trip is presented, ask God 'make it clear that I should stay back.' If not, I am planning on going." A short-term mission trip might be the one thing that God uses in placing a call on your life for long-term missions.

*Jeff Hackett and Jesse Pohle serve with MissionGO as Short-term Mobilizers and Church Relations. If you would like Jeff and Jesse to help you plan and prepare for short-term missions, please contact MissionGO. [www.missiongo.org](http://www.missiongo.org)*