

Short-Term Mission Trips and the Enhancement of Cultural Awareness¹

Kellen Gilbert² and William T. Hamilton³

Abstract

Many churches and religious organizations in the United States sponsor short mission trips to various locations around the world. These trips provide opportunities for service and spiritual gain and also for an experience in which missionaries can enhance their cultural awareness and understanding. In this study we used surveys and interviews to collect data on the cross-cultural experience of short-term mission trip participants. We found that participants received little pre-trip preparation and most had insufficient foreign language skills. Missioners liked and benefited from the fellowship and service aspects of the trip but did not indicate that the experience led to increased cultural awareness. [missions, short-term mission trips, cultural awareness]

Introduction

One of the main benefits of travel abroad can be increasing one's experience with other cultures by participating in some manner of cross-cultural exchange. The study abroad literature has examined cross-cultural dynamics and found that even short-term study abroad trips may be effective in increasing cross-cultural knowledge and global understanding. Researchers found that the more intensive the pre-trip preparation in terms of cultural studies, background information about the country/people/culture and degree of language proficiency, the more complete and effective the trip can be in increasing cross-cultural knowledge (Martin 1989:249; Boyle, Nackerud and Kilpatrick 1999:202; McCabe 2004; Mapp, McFarland and Newell 2007:47). For example, one university offers a Foreign Studies minor to students, regardless of major, who participate in a study abroad program. The minor includes required coursework in language area studies, cultural studies and intercultural communication. Anecdotally, students who take the course have more successful study abroad experiences, including an increase in their cultural and global awareness (Martin 1989: 42). Another study abroad program included pre-trip preparation meetings that focused specifically on the history and culture of the country to be visited – in this case, Ireland. Post-trip student assessment indicated an overall gain in cross-cultural knowledge, though correlations with pre-trip preparation were not examined (Mapp, McFarland and Newell 2007:43).

The short-term mission trip is similar in

many ways to academic study abroad programs, and their popularity has grown over the past two decades. About 30,000 Americans went on short-term missions in 1979; over 1.6 million North Americans participated in short-term missions in 2006 (MacDonald 2006). Not only do churches of most of the major Christian denominations send groups on short-term missions, but also not-for-profit organizations and for-profit companies offer trips. Mission trip participants visit other cultures and engage in some type of activity, from proselytizing to construction work. One mission leader defines the term mission as "crossing cultural boundaries for the sake of the gospel" (Crouch 2007:32). Aside from work projects and hoped for spiritual benefits, the stated goal of short-term missions is to offer a cross-cultural experience to missionaries which enhances their cultural and global awareness and understanding.

Anthropology has a history of interaction with and criticism of religious mission efforts both within and outside of the United States (Stipe 1980:167; Salamone 1986; Headland 1996:169, 173; Peacock 1996:164-165). In the latter part of the 1800s and early 1900s missionaries in the United States and Canada provided information to anthropologists about Native American cultures and were acknowledged for their knowledge and expertise in cultural and linguistic studies, even publishing in academic journals (Higham 2003:547, 549; Tomalin 2009). More criticism, though, is directed toward established missions and the impact of long-term mission activities on cultures.

A study by van der Geest and Kirby (1992:61-69) provides a synopsis of the “love/hate relationship” between anthropologists and missionaries, culled primarily from professional ethnographers working in Africa (1930-1965), some of whom happened to be both anthropologists and missionaries. While many anthropologists acknowledged in interviews feeling ambivalent about missionaries, among the sixty-three ethnographies analyzed by van der Geest and Kirby, two-thirds never mentioned the impact of missionaries on the cultures represented in the literature (70), even though many of the anthropologists depended on the missionaries for hospitality and information. As you would expect, missionaries often expressed ambivalence about anthropologists (64-66). The most severe criticisms came from African-born anthropologists who contended that missionaries were agents of the larger colonial enterprise (76). While the stereotype may be widespread in the anthropological community, ambivalence toward missionaries seldom receives substantive attention by scholars who focus instead on more pressing areas of investigation.

More recent anthropological studies have taken an interest in the impact of missionaries, not so much as agents of destruction but as agents in the inevitable processes of diffusion and acculturation (Cavalcanti 2005). Anthropological studies that take the mission enterprise into account deal almost exclusively with long-term career missionaries who work through established mission structures. In a field study of Lubavitcher emissaries in Great Britain, Berman (2009:70) focused on the social and personal faith-based rewards of emissary work instead of the impacts on the recipients of the mission efforts. Another study examined Mormon missionaries in Japan and concluded that the slow conversion rate by the Japanese may be in part due to the young American missionaries’ inadequate instruction about Japanese religion and culture before beginning their work (Mullins 2008:569). Our interest, however, is limited to short-term mission activity by North American churches and organizations.

Short-term mission trips are a rather new phenomenon and have only recently begun to be critically assessed. Most of this critical evalua-

tion comes from members of the religious community. One of the main findings is that most short-term missions benefit the participants more than the mission recipients. American missionaries require activities and outcomes, often resulting in “make-work projects.” A Nairobi pastor told a North American “(a)fter you leave, we repaint many of the walls that you painted!” (Crouch 2007:32). Others require hands-on investments with “feel-good” emotional rewards with minimal critical or cultural consideration. On one mission trip, a church group handed out USD \$50 to families in a Honduran village (except single mothers) over the objections of local church workers (Jeffrey 2001:6). Other writers have questioned the overall effectiveness of a one to two week stay, the cost effectiveness of such trips and the degree of pre-trip cultural and language training received by the participants (Jeffrey 2001:6).

The few empirical studies (reported in secular publications) of short-term mission trips have focused on the effects of the mission experience on participants’ spiritual growth and also on cultural identity and culture shock (Moore, Jones and Austin 1987; Tuttle 2000; Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciovica and Gorton 2006:154). A more recent study examined the psychological functioning among short-term missionaries and found the participants experienced more life satisfaction as a result of the increased religious support and fellowship on the trip (Bjorck and Kim 2009). In a sociological study of short-term missions, Trinitapoli and Vaisey (2009) found that the overall mission trip was a transformative religious experience for the adolescent missionaries (139). The authors did not examine cross-cultural awareness or long-term effects of the mission experience.

We conducted this qualitative study to gain information specifically about the cross-cultural aspects of short-term mission trips from the participants’ perspective. We were interested in the kinds of advance preparation short-term mission participants received before their departure. We were also interested to learn if having a cross-cultural experience was a reason to go on the mission trip and if participants felt that the trip had expanded their cultural awareness.

Methods

To collect data about the short-term mission trip experience we used a survey with a non-random sample to include twenty-five area churches and organizations that sponsored short-term mission trips. We mailed hard copies of the survey and emailed electronic versions to all campus ministry organizations at a southern regional state university and to all area churches after calling to explain the project and invite the participation of short-term mission trip alumni. We asked respondents to forward the survey to other mission trip participants. We also conducted face-to-face interviews with self-identified trip participants at local campus ministries and churches. No names or addresses were collected, though we did ask respondents to name their mission group's affiliation. The institutional review board of Southeastern Louisiana University approved the project.

The survey consisted of open- and close-ended questions. The respondents were instructed to answer as completely as possible with examples and descriptions. We asked about the purpose of the mission trip, its planning and logistical aspects. For example:

What was the purpose of the mission?

How was the mission site chosen?

We next asked about trip preparation, specifically about language experience and training and instruction about the country and culture to be visited. Some questions included:

Do you speak [*insert local language*]? At what level? How would you describe your language skills? Have you had formal language classes (e.g. college Spanish)?

Did you receive language training in preparation for the trip? Explain.

What types of information did you receive about the *country* before the trip? Please describe the information.

What types of information did you receive about the *community you would be working with* before the trip?

What types of information did you receive about the *culture* before the trip?

We then asked about the reasons the participant went on the trip and what he or she gained from the experience. These questions were deliberately open and general so as not to lead the respondents.

Why did you choose to go on the mission trip?

What did you hope to get out of the experience?

What did you gain from the experience?

To analyze the results we focused on common themes in the responses. Individual responses were then analyzed for frequency and co-occurrence using SPSS Text Analysis.

Findings

One hundred and fifty surveys were distributed and fifty-five mission trip participants completed the survey for a response rate of 37%. We also did face-to-face interviews with ten additional participants who were suggested by local ministers. As a result of forwarded surveys, our respondents were from Colorado, Louisiana, North Carolina and Texas. The ages ranged from 19 to 68, with 77% being under 24 years old.

All the respondents participated in an organized, formal mission trip that lasted between seven and thirty days. The short-term mission trips fell into three categories of sponsorship: churches, third party mission trip providers (companies that organize mission trips for a fee) and university campus ministries. Respondents on church-sponsored trips (59% of total respondents) were affiliated with Christian denominations including Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Southern Baptist and United Methodist. Survey respondents who went on trips organized by campus ministries, such as the Wesley Foundation (affiliated with the United Methodist Church) and Campus Crusade for Christ (an interdenominational evangelical organization) made up 18.5% of the sample. The remaining 22% of respondents participated in third party provided mission trips. All of these trips were sanctioned by the denomination or parent orga-

nization. Recognizing our own biases and the limitations of our small sample, we choose not to examine relationships between individual religious denomination and trip preparation or cultural gains.

The majority of trips were to Mexico or Honduras (60%) and the rest to other Latin American and Caribbean countries. The main purpose of the mission trips fell into four categories: construction, such as building churches, bridges and cisterns; working with children, usually offering a vacation bible school or orphanage assistance; and medical, offering basic medical or dental clinics. Less than five percent of the respondents said the main purpose of the trip was to proselytize. None of these mission trips was sponsored by local churches. During all of the respondents' visits their groups led worship services in the community and activities for the local children.

Pre-trip Preparation

The participants had little in-depth language or cultural preparation prior to the trip. While most of the short-term mission trips were to Spanish-speaking communities, knowing the language of the mission recipients was not a criterion for trip participation. Over 90% of the respondents did not speak the language of the mission recipients. The majority described their language skills as "none at all" to "I can say gracias and buenas (sic) dias—that's it." Only one respondent mentioned receiving pre-trip language training specifically from the trip organizers.

Information about the country to be visited came from presentations by previous short-term mission groups (particularly for church groups) or from individual research of websites (many mentioned the State Department's site) and travel guides. The information was of general interest to travelers: climate and natural history, safety issues, crime statistics and health information, especially vaccinations needed. Some participants also received information about the prevailing religious views in the country to be visited.

When asked about the types of information they received about the people with whom they would be working, 50% of the participants

responded that they received minimal information. Those who did receive pre-trip information learned about the material needs and poverty status of the community. Some received information about the spiritual needs of the mission recipients, in particular their lack of familiarity with the gospel and the number of 'unsaved' community members. One wrote that the mission participants were instructed that their "(m)ission work will give due respect to local customs, traditions and cultural values when these are compatible with Christian faith." Another respondent often referred to the mission recipients as "the natives."

We asked about the cultural information participants received prior to the trip, and the responses were quite varied. Over half of the respondents (55%) received some helpful information, including suggestions about appropriate behavior and lists of cultural "do's and don'ts." Most of the missionaries' examples fell under instructions such as "do be respectful" and "don't eat food from the street vendor." Nearly 35% of the respondents received no information about the culture. One missionary said his group was told "the best way to learn is to experience it so they weren't given any information beforehand." Another respondent wrote "(we) didn't need information since it was Mexico and all Americans know Mexican culture." And another replied that they "(d)idn't really need to know about the culture because they worked during the day in a Mexican border town but returned to Texas to eat and sleep and they wouldn't have much interaction with the mission recipients." Others reported picking up tidbits of cultural information: Hondurans love soccer or Mexican men can be *machista* and crude toward women.

Many mission participants did receive specific pre-trip information about how to handle cultural differences. These fell broadly under the category of cultural respect, such as how women should dress, what hand gestures to avoid and recommendations about asking permission before taking a photograph. The other main category addressed alcoholic beverages. This was of particular concern of those participants who did not drink alcoholic beverages for religious reasons but may encounter situations such as being offered traditional drinks in the spirit of

sharing. The missionaries were given pointers on how to refuse without being impolite.

Why respondents chose to go on a mission trip fell into three themes. Service was the most common response with 43.8% replying that they went to “serve God” or to “help others not as fortunate.” Over 30% of the respondents cited personal fulfillment as their primary reason for making the trip. Responses such as “I went to benefit my soul” or “for my own spiritual development” were common. Fewer respondents (18.8%) mentioned the cultural experience as a reason to go on a mission trip. One respondent participated to convert others to Christianity.

The responses to what the participant got out of the short-term mission trip were varied. Over 75% of the respondents replied that their short-term mission experiences resulted in receiving a loving feeling, being blessed, gifts of love, gaining a stronger relationship with God and strengthening friendships with other mission participants. About 24% said they gained an appreciation of another culture out of the experience or learned about another part of the world. One respondent benefited most by being able to participate in a worship service in the Spanish language.

Related to the trip benefits were questions about what aspect of the mission trip participants like best and least. Our findings indicate that camaraderie (fellowship) with other missionaries and a deeper relationship with God emerged as the most common themes related to benefits of the trip. A number of themes emerged including working with others, interacting with children and the fellowship with other missionaries. Less than 10% of the respondents found experiencing a new culture the best part of the trip, about the same number of those who reported that the side trips and going to the beach were the best parts.

Three main themes emerged from the question about what missionaries liked least about the experience. Over 50% of the respondents mentioned the working and living conditions in country as the worst part of the trip, in particular no air conditioning and no available hot water for bathing. Language barriers and not being able to communicate was another common theme, as was viewing poverty. One respondent said the thing she liked least about the experi-

ence was that the mission for most participants seemed to be “all about me” and not for the benefit of the villagers.

Discussion

Although the cross-cultural experience is touted as a goal and a benefit of faith-based short-term mission trips, our results suggest this goal is not being met. Certainly we were not able to measure such factors as person spiritual growth, however, we conclude that short-term mission trips do not produce any substantive growth in the cross-cultural awareness of typical missionaries.

Our results indicate that mission participants received negligible pre-trip preparation in terms of knowledge of the recipient culture. This low level of preparation indicated by our respondents differed from the more specific instruction focusing on language and cultural studies described in the study abroad literature. Also, very few short-term mission participants had sufficient language skills and very low expectations that they would be able to communicate in the local language. Moreover, the exchanges tended to be one-sided: participants without exception felt that they were sharing out of their abundance in material goods, labor and knowledge of the gospel with their underprivileged recipients. But almost no participants reported what they may have gained from their recipient hosts, other than appreciation for what they did for them.

Conclusions

Short-term mission trips are service-oriented/religious-themed experiences that expose people in minimal ways to cultures and ways of life different from their own. The participants appear to give of themselves and experience personal growth, but in our survey they demonstrate no particular interest or inclination to expand their world-view. Perhaps more extensive cultural study, rudimentary language preparation and exercises in critical thinking pre-trip might yield more substantive cross-cultural experiences. We think too that short-term mission trip organizers may find the pre-trip preparation processes used by successful short study abroad trips beneficial.

It may be too much to expect that short-term mission preparation should include exposure to self-critical analysis by Christian liberation theologians who share the larger spiritual goals of Christians in all cultures but who are also honest about negative aspects of cultural penetration. At least some familiarity with Ivan Illich's famous speech (1968), "To Hell with Good Intentions," and writings of Leonardo Boff in Brazil (Boff and Boff 1987) or Jon Sobrino (1983) in El Salvador would provide grounding for cross-cultural awareness by mission participants. Although its political context of the late 1960s is somewhat dated, Illich's famous speech to an international study abroad conference is still required reading for international service learning trips sponsored by many colleges and universities around the U.S. Bible studies tailored for lay audiences by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez (1973) and Argentine Methodist José Miguez Bonino (1983) offer straightforward sociological and historical analysis of colonial and modern mission efforts. They point out not only the positive aspects of the diffusion of Christianity, but also the damage done by well intentioned but misguided missionaries and the structures they represent in the dominant cultures.

College students with good cross-cultural preparation are often required to read and discuss the critical theories of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian literacy pioneer who, during a period of exile, served as director of education for the World Council of Churches. Before service learning trips to Latin America, we have required our undergraduate and graduate students to read Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano's acclaimed *Open Veins of Latin America* (1973), a blistering criticism of the imposition of cultural and spiritual values by Spain and Portugal in the colonial era as well as in our era by the dominant neocolonial powers, including their corporate representatives, investment bankers, diplomats and missionaries. Graduate students with colonial Latin American research interests are expected to read Ricard and Simpson's *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico* (1982).

With so few studies of the effects of short-term missions, we hope that further research will assess their phenomenal popularity as well as the positive and negative effects of short-term mis-

sions on recipient cultures. Our study leaves us with many more questions to ask. It would be interesting to have more demographic data to assess correlations between variables such as education level and increase in cultural awareness. And, the perspective of the missionized individuals in terms of the mission as a cross-cultural experience would be useful. ○

Notes

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2. Kellen Gilbert received a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Rutgers University 1994. She is an Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana. Her mailing address is SLU 10686, Hammond, LA 70402. She can be reached by telephone at 985-549-5037 and by email at kgilbert@selu.edu.

3. William T. Hamilton is a visiting professor in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. In 2000 he received a Ph.D. in Latin American History from Tulane University. He can be reached by mail at M.A. Program in Liberal Studies, UNCG, P.O. Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170, by telephone at 336-315-7028 and by email at wthamilt@uncg.edu.

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