

SHORT TERM MISSION - WHAT ARE THE CRITICISMS WE FACE?

Notes of presentation made at the Global Connections Short Term Mission Forum Wednesday 13th October 2010 at Northampton, UK

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

My name is Martin Lee and I work for Global Connections. We had hoped to get Rachel Green to lead this session but she flew to Cape Town today to lead a workshop there on the same topic as part of the Lausanne Congress.

So I am the poor substitute. First a little background on me. For 25 years I was director of CORD, at that time a specialist refugee and child care agency. While we employed large numbers of local people, we often sent short term professionals as trainers, facilitators and project leaders. Refugees often have no power in the country where they have asylum and having people from outside was important. So I have probably facilitated about 400 to 500 placements of professionals for periods of anything from one to three years. A few stayed on for longer term but most of these international folk were there for less than three years.

I have also been responsible for a variety of short term teams and sending unskilled volunteers to non-refugee settings, such as children's homes, for placements of a few weeks or months. So I have spent most of my career in short term mission work of some form. My own first mission trip was an evangelistic tent campaign in Finland – not speaking a word of Finnish!!

So I have been involved in a wide variety of short term mission projects. Obviously there are hugely different types of short term mission and it is hard to generalise in a session like this

- Teams going for a few weeks or so
- Unskilled or partly skilled individuals of three months or so
- Professionals using their skills over one to three years
- Add your own as the list is wide and means different things in different cultures

All could be described as short term here in the UK. In the US, I find the term short term mission is usually mainly applied to the first category, a team of a few weeks or so. This session will focus on that concept but hopefully some of the principles here will cover all categories of short term mission.

I would like to think I did a good job, that the people whom I helped send were transformed and that in turn they helped transform the local community where they served. Certainly I have large numbers of friends who are now serving overseas longer term or work in this country in a full-time capacity in a church or agency. That has been thrilling to see. I also still have many friends in a wide range of countries such as Thailand, Philippines, India, Cambodia, Malawi, Sudan - who have been helped by the professionals and hopefully the less skilled volunteers that were sent.

So I believe that much can be accomplished by short-term mission – contacts can be made, people can be converted, those going can be transformed, leaders can be trained, facilities can be built. However I also believe that none of these can possibly replace the long-term involvement of living in a community sharing our lives incarnationally or other forms of long-term commitment, relationship and partnership.

As I reflect back on my career and the impact I have had, to be frank I see the main benefit has been the positive effect on the lives of those who have gone. That does not deny the local benefit, but I want to be honest. In one sense it is hard to say that. Refugee settings are notoriously difficult to monitor any benefit – the whole aim is that people can go home or settle locally. So there is no question in my mind that they need people from outside to protect and advocate, but I wonder if we sent too many people from the West and made the communities

dependent on external assistance. We did try very hard to involve local people at senior levels, use local skills and resources, honour people's culture, not bring in western norms – yet I still feel that perhaps even our very presence and the way we worked perpetuated dependency and paternalism.

On a personal note, my son spent a year in Manchester with the Pais Project based in a church and sports project. It had a lasting effect on him and he is still in contact with people from the youth work.

My eldest daughter spent a year with BMS World Mission in France and then a year in India. She was studying Hindi and used her year out to spend six months at JNU in Delhi and six months working in a rural school. She greatly enjoyed it, but came back disturbed by the effect her presence had on the school, as she was treated like royalty, even though she was very culturally sensitive and aware. She felt she had much more impact as a Christian at the University just living and being with others, than in a structured short term mission project organised by me. She subsequently sent me a paper very critical of short term mission, the thesis of which was that even well run and monitored short term trips were mainly about making the person feel good, not the impact of the project.

WHAT ARE THE CRITICISMS WE FACE?

The title for this evening is **What are the criticisms we face?** I have started to list a few in the preamble, but I would like us now to spend some time reflecting. There is a wealth of experience and expertise in this room, so I want to draw from that knowledge base.

So what are some of the criticisms we face? There is no question that a small number, but increasing number and increasingly vocal group, of people have major reservations about short term mission, and how it is undertaken by the West, especially the very short term trips.

One such is Vinoth Ramachandra and I have copied out a short article that he wrote. In that he writes; *"Here is a staggering statistic that I came across recently. Robert Wuthnow, the eminent sociologist of religion at Princeton University, has estimated that up to 1.6 million American Christians take part in overseas "mission trips" each year, with churches spending at least \$2.4 billion per year on such trips. What is unsurprising is that many of these 1-3 week "mission trips" are to the Caribbean and Central America, with luxury resorts such as the Bahamas reporting one "short-term missionary" for every 15 residents. One would expect Mexico, which receives the most American "mission teams" every year, to be the most Christian nation on earth."*

We might just reject this as extrapolated nonsense, until one realises that Vinoth is probably the leading theologian in Sri Lanka, comes from the IFES stable and has enormous respect in the Global church. He has been a regular speaker in key mission circles.

I have been helping Rachel Green with her presentation at Cape Town. She has done a lot of research into critiques of short term mission.. To quote from her paper she will present in Cape Town *"Praises and critiques of this trend tend to be proportionally extreme, touting short term mission either as miraculous recruiters of long-term missionaries or insidious sowers of third-world dependency", says Abram Honig from Honduras."*

Kurt Ver Beek from Calvin College, Michigan says that from his research traditional short term mission DIDN'T DO MUCH AT ALL. In his survey of 127 North American short-termers and 78 Hondurans for whom they built new homes after 1998's devastating Hurricane Mitch, Ver Beek found that neither group had experienced notable life changes.

But other research papers (maybe 50 or more dissertations written on the subject in the last 15 years) conclude that STMs significantly increase participants' spirituality, financial giving to missions, prayer for missions and likelihood to become career missionaries. James Cecil's doctoral study found that 70% of the short-termers surveyed increased their mission giving as a result of their short-term experience'.

As English, we don't like extremes, preferring the middle way. So we will find it hard to take Vinoth's and others criticisms. Perhaps we also will react – well I am sure many short term people are changed for the better but 70% seems a bit high!!

As I have looked at this topic over many years, I have seen little research about the impact of the community where the short term mission trip has taken place. Most things are about the benefit to the participant and maybe that says something. So what benefit is there really? Are there better ways of achieving the outcomes? Are there inherent dangers in the very concept of short term mission, or at least in how we undertake it.

So now not is your turn to input into this debate. In development, when one works

DISCUSSION TIME:

What are main dangers that you see in short term mission trips?

Spend a few minutes writing down your thoughts. Decide your top "danger".

Divide into groups of five or six. Share at least your top one and if time others that do not come up from others the first time round.

Identify 4 main dangers that you all agree on. Use 3 to 6 words to describe each danger. Write each one in LARGE letters on a separate piece of paper for each one. (a, the, of etc don't count)

Example: Local people have little control of project

Group onto the blue hot air balloon material to find major trends.

Let's look at a few specific questions:

1. Don't short term trips disempower local people? Doesn't a team just build dependency on the West? How can short term trips be empowering rather than disempowering to local people?

My experience is that in many settings, my very presence can be disempowering. I have lost count of the times that on arriving in a location that I am welcomed as the guest of honour, treating with incredible respect, expected to take charge of something I know nothing about, asked to speak, present prizes etc etc. We have all been there haven't we – and secretly, aren't we rather chuffed.. As isn't there a part of us that responds inappropriately.

Whether we like it or not, our culture is one of inherent superiority and that is incredibly disempowering to others. It may not be projected by us, and we might try really hard - it is just a fact of life. So I would ask "How many short term teams are put under the authority of local leadership and helped to cope with that?" I hope it is something that we all do, but I don't see a lot of good practice in this area. Usually we have an expatriate team leader – so we can disciple and care for the team.

I don't know if you have read Kate Fox's book "Watching the English". She gives an excellent analysis of English culture – so sorry Scots, Welsh and Irish or people from other areas of Europe. As a nation, we are incredibly messed up. She calls us a nation with a social dis-ease. We are reserved, so don't tell it how it is. Yet as soon as we have even a little alcohol or lose our inhibitions in some other way, all hell breaks loose. We believe passionately in fairness, yet have social systems that build in structural unfairness. Our home is our castle, but once you are inside and part of the inner circle, my home is your home. We are very self-effacing, yet we know, not just believe, that we are the greatest nation with the best culture on earth – and that all other cultures are really English underneath.

So it is actually possible to have a short term trip that empowers when the English are involved? As those who send we have a real responsibility to help those going to not have a patronizing, imperialistic attitude. Even if it is a project or teams that someone wants, are we helping our folk go with the right attitudes? The default of an English person is that we know it all, feel superior to these poor uneducated people and insensitive to the culture. So often I have seen STM trips where people are not willing to learn from those whom they are serving.

- Do teams realise that they will learn far more than they will give – in fact will not give much at all that couldn't have been provided locally?
- Is our selection process robust enough so that people don't do damage in this area?
- Are we investing enough in this part of our orientation?

2. Aren't many projects just the idea of the external agency – or aren't really what the local people need or want? How do we avoid this?

I think this is a huge question. To quote Vinoth again: *"There are few Asian Christians who will openly refuse to welcome such "mission teams". The more opportunistic among us tend to see such visits as a chance to receive favours in return: for example, a parting gift of money or a future invitation to visit a team member in his or her own country. But most Asian Christians will not refuse simply because hospitality is a cherished value and an ancient tradition, especially among the rural poor. I remember a Burmese pastor once telling me, when I enquired why the Burmese church graciously continued to host visits from affluent Singaporean Christians coming as "evangelism trainers" (to Burmese churches that had much more to teach the Singaporeans about evangelism than vice versa), he simply replied, "We find it difficult to say "no" to visitors."*

Is our questioning of a project robust? Is the way we ask questions culturally appropriate "Would you like us to " In many cultures the response will be yes, not because they want it, but because that is the expected answer. Or maybe they say yes because that is the only way they perceive they can get the resources we offer.

In the mid-80s I facilitated the setting up of a project for disabled children. It was initially run by international staff and after four years we appointed a local Thai Director. Slowly over a number of years more and more Thai staff were appointed. Most long term people withdrew and in my conversations with the Director, he wanted to become more and more dependent on local people and churches. Yet as we started to withdraw our short term teams and placements as well, the Thai Director started to get nervous. He thought that by not having access to short term teams, he would slowly lose support from the UK and other countries. Did he really want a constant succession of short term people? so in the end as we withdrew trying to empower him, trying to respond to his desire to localise the project, other organisations came along, saw the potential and started to send their own short term teams. It has gone on for years now. The teams have been of real benefit, but would it have been better to have found some other way to address his concerns. Did he really want it? It is impossible to say.

- What systems do we have in place to ensure that a project REALLY is wanted, isn't because people see no other way to develop a relationship and are fearful funding might cease.
- Are we cultural astute in the questions we ask when setting up a project?

3. Wouldn't the money be much better spent on funding local employment? How do we answer this? Why don't you just send them the money?

I wonder how many of us actually cost out a programme. If it is something like a building project, how much would it have cost to employ local people and build the same, probably better facility, using local labour. Have we looked at raising some of the resources locally? Do we ever do that cost analysis? Do we ever think of alternatives first, rather than second?

There is no question in my mind that a badly perceived short-term project can be a drain on long-term mission and funding of local projects, using up so much financial resource. Remember that \$2.4 billion figure from the US, and many say that is a low estimate, and it is nearer \$4 billion. Just think of the personnel resources to provide experiences for wealthy young Christians from the West.

Kurt Ver Beek wrote in his research: "*To spend \$30,000 on painting a church or building a house that could have cost \$2,000 if done with local labour doesn't make a whole lot of sense*"

Perhaps the argument could be that the people going from the UK become passionate about mission and actually raising money for a project is impersonal and actually doesn't work. As a result of short-term mission, there will hopefully be increased prayer and giving by the person following their short-term experience. Well done short term mission can convert a person into a lifelong intercessor and financial supporter of mission, though we must acknowledge that not all research shows this to be the case.

- Are we doing any form of cost analysis?
- Are looking at creative ways to help people access local resources?
- Are we looking to fund local projects without creating another form of dependency?

4. Don't short term trips perpetuate the idea that mission is done to people by better educated and better off Westerners? Aren't short term mission teams just a new hedonistic phenomenon made possible by globalisation and cheap air fares? How do we avoid accusations of imperialism?

Isn't it arrogance to assuming the West should inflict its lifestyle, gifts and influence onto other cultures? What gives us the right and credibility to go to other cultures in Jesus name in the way that we do?

To quote Vinoth Ramachandra again "*There is a dilemma. It is extremely difficult for us to say to zealous American, Singaporean or Korean Christians that they are really not needed. While there is a lot of talk about "mission partnerships" these days, the theologies of mission that we hold are rarely scrutinized and challenged in a genuine rich-poor encounter. The world of "missions" seems hopelessly fragmented - and more pragmatist than ever. As long as this state of affairs continues, will not the practice of "partnership" be loaded in favour of those churches with the bigger wallets and the louder voices?*"

It seems to me that if we are not careful short term mission can produce a very distorted form of partnership.

In reply to Vinoth, Eddie Arthur responds: *"I think that it is important that Christians in different countries and cultures have the opportunities to meet with one another and to learn from one another. To me, this is the great advantage of the whole summer trip concept...If people don't travel, then the opportunities for mutual learning and encouragement are sadly diminished.*

However, as Vinoth implies, the dynamic of this learning and encouragement is sadly distorted by finance. Rich people can go on mission trips and poor people can't. Not only that, but the rich people feel often feel that because they are rich, then their role is to give and not to receive.

It is incredibly important that we listen to the voices of those who are on the receiving end of our mission efforts, no matter how uncomfortable that is."

The blogger known Lingamish says: *"he second weakness is the lack of reciprocity. In every case I've ever seen, Western visitors come with the perspective that they have something to give and that the locals should be grateful recipients of their largesse. But the longer I live in Africa, the more I'm convinced that we are the ones who should come begging. Africans have much to teach us about life based on spirituality rather than materialism and the richness of a society centred on relationships rather than the individual."*

"The Church in the Developing South knows its wealth. We in the West have yet to understand our poverty."

- Are we finding ways of partnership that we are not "West is Best" or West only?
- Are looking at creative ways to assist poorer people have the opportunity to take part in mission trips?
- Are we teaching our participants as real respect for what the so called recipient has to give to us?

Maybe the Global Connections Code of Best Practice needs more on these issues and we should review them in the light of dangers and concerns.

It is incredibly important that we listen to the criticism of short term mission especially from those who are on the receiving end of our mission efforts, no matter how uncomfortable that is. Let's take the criticism and improve what we are doing to the Glory of God.

Martin Lee
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