JUST SHORT TERM?

Justice and Short-term Mission

Brad Watson

Coincidence, some would say. But not me. No way! I was 20, single, recommitted to God and delighted that my friend Michael also wanted to go to Africa for a year. He wanted Kenya or Uganda and assured me that we should buy a gun as soon as we got there. Maybe that had something to do with growing up in South Africa but I was just a Sydney boy and, frankly, I wasn't so sure. All I knew was that two years of study at Avondale College with an unofficial "major" in Australian fishing had left me restless and eager for adventure. All my life I'd heard mission stories and I wanted to do something big for God. Something adventurous and risky and powerful.

Things unfolded quickly. Within days of deciding that we wanted to go, a student I'd never met had mysteriously introduced herself to us and suggested we talk to a lecturer. "Harwood Lockton," she'd said. "You should talk to him."

It turned out that even college lecturers have friends and one of his happened to be the director of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in West Africa. Contact was made with David Syme, a veteran of humanitarian and development work. To our surprise, ADRA had just been granted a large education project by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and wanted a few young Aussies to help run a program on the border of war-torn Liberia. There was no doubt in my mind that it was God's doing. The timing was perfect. Within the space of a few short months, we arrived in Ivory Coast, West Africa with shaved heads, no proficiency in French, no training and all the accumulated wisdom of heavily vaccinated 20 year olds halfway through a teaching degree.

Many memories of that year stand out for me as way points in an unforgettable adventure: touring through six of the world's economically poorest countries; impassable tracks that would make a four-wheel-drive enthusiast ecstatic; refugee church in the shade of a mango tree; offending my boss because I turned the stove on

during Sabbath; lifting weights with rebel soldiers; capsizing in a fetid lagoon black with raw sewage; realising that my assistant was the ex-Assistant Minister for Education in the country he had fled; overhearing a group of school principals scoffing that I was so young I hadn't even grown hair yet.

Apart from the responsible task of supporting refugee schools, we did some dumb things. Michael collapsed on a remote road while driving alone with a triple dose of malaria, typhoid and dysentery. When medical help arrived, he was close to death and they couldn't find a vein to connect to a drip. Michael still believes that it was the cola drink he managed to swallow that saved him. As depressed as you can be when you are a million miles from home, I thought it would be fun to throw our UN-sponsored vehicle sideways on a muddy track, revelling in the sensation of the vehicle fishtailing wildly. The terrified looks of the driver and passengers in an oncoming bus on a blind bend reminded me that while Michael almost died, I almost killed!

Scattered through the memories of that year are some that have shaped me in ways I find hard to explain. People I met touched the rawness of the man I was becoming. These are the experiences that broke my heart and still prod at my selfish soul.

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Three stories from Africa

Dominique was the unforgettable, brave teenage girl who hobbled into church after we finally rented a building near the mango tree. While we sang, she sat sobbing and continued to do so through the entire sermon. Dom and her mother spoke French. I spoke only English. But the sobbing was universal and easily understood. An elder explained that her upper thigh ached terribly and oozed pus from a huge ulcer that no doctor had been able to heal. We took her to a Catholic clinic in a distant town the next day, filled with hope and optimism.

I can still see the X-ray on the wall and the doctor pointing to the missing ball joint of her thigh bone. What do you say to a girl who is in terrible pain and dying from cancer? What do you say when there is no hope?

All I could do was take her to a beautiful French patisserie and wonder why she sat demurely and quietly declined to eat the beautiful cake I purchased for her. I felt like crying when she explained that her younger brothers and sisters had never seen such beautiful food and she wanted to take that impossibly small piece home to share with them. In that moment I first understood what it meant to live in a communal culture where family is everything.

Then there was the moment when I arrived at a crowded, mud-and-thatch refugee school and poked my head in the door to interrupt an elderly, shabbily dressed man teaching 50 or more children the "one-times" tables.

With all the wisdom of a cynical 20 year old who had spent two years grumbling his way through education

classes in Australia, I was sure I had spotted another imposter. It was not uncommon, you see, for village chiefs to appoint bogus teachers and split the meagre volunteer salary. That very morning, I had caught a principal who could neither read nor write. Not long before—and to my great dismay—on a school visit, I'd been offered any girl that I liked.

"Excuse me," I said, nose crinkling at the pungent smell of dozens of unwashed bodies that filled the dim building, "can you tell me what your qualification is?"

I'll never forget the way that old man straightened his shoulders, squared his feet in his dusty thongs and met my eye above the sea of small heads.

"Yes, sir," he replied with utmost dignity. "I have a PhD in mathematics from Cambridge University."

Finally, there is the memory of her. I'd arrived in a remote village with a truckload of supplies in a mid-morning that was becoming hot and humid. The children had danced with joy. They had pressed around me, the great white stranger from afar who brought them the things they needed to learn. As usual I had felt both pleased and embarrassed, at ease and uncomfortable, a reluctant "rock star" who thought himself a fraud. And there in the crowd I had caught a glimpse of a girl, perhaps 16 years of age. Tears were streaming down her brown cheeks, a picture of misery in a crowd of joy and celebration.

Astonished, and mistaking her tears for grief, I pushed my way forward and discovered that her eyes were red raw, eyelashes turned inwards by the scarring of trachoma. It was crazy. I'd never seen anything like it. She was suffering, in constant pain, yet invisible. Nobody seemed to care.

Rashly, I berated the father who struggled to comprehend my offer to send her to the capital for medical treatment. "Why didn't you seek treatment earlier?" I demanded.

But she was a girl in a remote area and the family was very poor. Her blindness and pain were of little concern.

The short-term phenomenon

Time has a strange way about it. Sometimes things come full circle. As I write this, I find myself occupying the same office as did Harwood Lockton, the principled lecturer who made my first volunteer experience possible. Strangely, although I lecture now in International Poverty and Development Studies, and should know better, it only recently occurred to me that I have been a short-term missioner, as they are called in the literature. Somehow, in my mind, I'd associated short-term mission with trips that lasted a few weeks—with a heavy emphasis on evangelism.

Because I'd gone for a year and lived on the border of a war zone to work on an ADRA project providing education to school-age refugees, it didn't even cross my mind that I was one of millions of people who have left the comfort and security of their homes to participate in various forms of short-term mission. I certainly didn't know

that short-term mission trips can take place over a few weeks to two years. Duly processed by our church as volunteers, Michael and I just went and did it, ending up at different ends of the country with me—the frustrated fisherman—inland and him on the coast.

Since then, I have become aware that the wave of short-term missions is a social phenomenon. One commentator states that in 1965 there were just 540 North American short-termers.[1] In 1998, Richard Slimbach estimated that there were 450,000 short-term missionaries sent from North America yearly.[2] By 2008, this estimate had grown to between 1.6 million[3] and 2.2 million,[4] making short-term mission one of the great trends of Christian and other religious groups in America and other affluent countries.

And short-term mission is not only about evangelism, prayer walks and witnessing. Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback Church in California, has promoted a "PEACE Plan" to defeat poverty in Rwanda, engaging short-term missioners in the quest to Plant new churches, Equip leaders, Assist the poor, Care for the sick and Educate the next generation.[5] YWAM (Youth With A Mission), founded in the 1960s by a young Assemblies of God pastor who envisioned thousands of young people going out in waves to every country, employs more than 11,000 staff engaged in humanitarian work, medical missionary activity, refugee settlement, literacy training and direct evangelism.[6]

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At Avondale College of Higher Education, where I teach, short-term mission and service-based travel is an integral part of our institutional culture. "One Mission" students regularly travel to places like Brazil, Cambodia and Mongolia to serve and engage in development projects. Education students teach in Indian, Nepali and Cambodian schools. Our nurses practice medicine in the Solomon Islands. Others travel to remote aboriginal communities on StormCo trips and I take students to Nepal to research with ADRA. Our theology students evangelise in Fiji and preach in Malaysia. Like Jesus, we leave home to enter other cultures where we try to integrate our education with the challenging task of meeting physical and spiritual needs.

Reconsidering short-term mission

The result of millions of people embarking on short-term mission—or perhaps the cause—is what Brian Howell calls the "Short-Term Mission Narrative."[7] Often, despite the destination, short-term mission participants talk about short-term mission in similar ways. They create a meta-narrative, a unified way of talking about the diversity of their experiences. And that shapes expectations.

You may have heard variations of "God put it in my heart", "It totally changed my life", "It was so cool—the trip was amazing!", "It opened my eyes", "It made me realise that we're all the same", "They have nothing but they are so happy", "God answered all our prayers", "Everyone was so friendly", "I really want to do it again", "We had an

awesome time", "God was so good to us" ,"There were X number of baptisms because of us" and "The kids are so cute."

For many individuals, these and similar narrative fragments do reflect their experience. Professor Richard Slimbach acknowledges that short-term experiences can succeed in getting people out of their "bubble" and can result in "life-changing experiences."[8]

However, for some short-term missioners the reality of their journey is quite the opposite. It is not popular to say "I don't think we made much of a difference", "We did stuff they could have done themselves", "We spent so much money on ourselves" or "I probably got more out of it than the local people." Such narrative doesn't fit the dominant discourse. And nor does critique that some trips are little more than "Christian Tourism", "Voluntourism", "Drive-by mission" or "Fly-by evangelism." It is not at all heartening to be described as well-intentioned foreigners fuelled by a "White Saviour" complex and what Zakaria calls "The White Tourist's Burden."[9] When confronted by this different sort of narrative, we tend to dismiss it as that of anti-Christian secular critics.

But before brushing off such criticism, let's ask the hard question. Imagine Christ being embraced by His father after the resurrection. Would He have said any of the things above? "Wow, it was so amazing, so cool, they have nothing but they are so happy."

I find it interesting that short-term mission isn't what Christ did. Remember that Jesus chose to be born into the culture He witnessed in. He learned the language, participated in the customs, ate the local food, experienced the daily reality of brutal Roman occupation, understood the complex political and social dynamics that led to oppression. Jesus went out of his way to mix with outcasts. He carefully and deliberately sought to reframe religious belief after decades listening and learning, and restore people to a grace-based relationship with God. His efforts could hardly be described as "voluntourism" or "short-term mission."

Jesus was what we might call a long-term missioner. He left every privilege behind. He suffered in order to love and for that He is remembered—and followed. For Jesus, volunteerism was not an escape or an adventure, a rare encounter with exotic culture with moments of authentic service mingled with luxury. And yet, in the context of forever, Jesus was on earth for a very short time and Paul rarely stayed longer than a few weeks or months in a single location.[10]

One of the interesting features of modern short-term mission is that it is becoming ever shorter and ever-more catered to the inexperienced. Morgan and Easterling note that, in 1974 short-term mission was one to three years, a period now described as "mid-term."[11] Currently, short-term mission encompasses trips of as short as a week. In the early 1980s, half of all short-termers went on to serve long term but now, for some potential critics, short-term mission acts as a "vaccinator of thousands who might otherwise be infected with the long-term bug."[12]

A point of difference between biblical examples of short-term mission—think of the story of Jonah, for example—is that many short-term mission trips cater to the short holiday expectations of individuals from Western culture and are packaged to provide a feel-good activity. In this sense, short-term mission can be rather unChristlike.

Doing short-term mission better

Based on my own limited experiences with short-term mission in several countries and the musings of many others who have queried the dominant narrative, I'd like to make some suggestions for ethical and impactful short-term mission so that we do short-term mission *justly*.

Do short-term mission, not charity. In their excellent book *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert say this, "Do not do things for people that they can do for themselves. Memorise this, recite it under your breath all day long, and wear it like a garland around your neck."[13] The underlying issue is dependency—a condition Reese defines as an "unhealthy reliance on foreign resources, personnel, and ideas, which stifles local initiative."[14] The logic is not new. Writing more than 100 years ago, Ellen White wrote in *The Ministry of Healing*, "We may give to the poor, and harm them, by teaching them to be dependent."[15]

In our own countries, we know that people who get given a lot without being encouraged to be self-reliant lose dignity and initiative. But we easily make the same mistakes in short-term mission when confronted with material poverty. When rich foreigners from a culture that demands immediate and tangible benefits give generously and build rapidly, their generosity can become toxic. Well-intentioned giving can strangle local initiative, corrupt local churches and make people dependent on foreign support. Successive waves of short-term mission can do more harm than good when genuine partnership is sacrificed at the altar of feel-good charity and handouts. As Ellen White put it, "Real charity helps men to help themselves."[16]

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Do short-term mission with humility, with an emphasis on relationships and as part of a long-term strategy that fits in with the goals and aspirations of local people. Reese argues that in Western culture we value outputs more than relationships.[17] However, in many poorer countries, relationships are far more valuable than projects. We need to be far more honest with enthusiastic young people. In two weeks it is possible to have a life-changing experience but rarely will it be as impactful for the local people unless local people are empowered and valued over a longer period of time. Humility requires awareness of our own limitations but also "a humble confession that God has always done extraordinary things through ordinary people—often in a very short amount of time."[18]

Do short-term mission but respect the power of the poor to teach. Just because they have less does not mean they are less. Ironically, short-term missioners sometimes embark on trips seeing themselves as saviours, but their post-trip narratives position them as the saved. Rarely, however, do very short trips provide enough

time with the poor to allow mutual learning and to allow us to reflect more deeply on our own shortcomings, prejudices and weaknesses. Johnson encourages short-term missioners to avoid the assumption that they must do something, rather than watch, learn and listen.[19]

Do short-term mission but beware the classic traps. Avoid travelling in large groups that function as a protective social bubble and harm the development of real relationships. Avoid thinking that the mission field is any less complex than your own local community. Accept that the best learning may not equate to happiness, positive feelings and wonderful experience. Value short-term mission for beginners that prioritises listening and learning before jumping into serving and doing.

Do short-term mission remembering that it is about people. For groups that are involved in witnessing, heed Richard Slimbach's warning that too many eager young people reduce mission to saving disembodied souls.[20] God's redemption plan is wholistic. It requires a restoration of broken relationships, the formation of new relationships, and a balance between giving compassionately and seeking justice. After providing a handout, too few missioners depart realising that they, in all their eagerness, might be part of the problem we call global inequality.

Twenty years later

I personally have no doubt that short-term mission can be powerful. My year working with Liberian refugees inspired a career, shaped my character, challenged my beliefs about my own culture and provided experiences that continue to shape my actions more than 20 years later. I still remember the culture shock I experienced returning to Avondale College where students complained about the cafeteria food. There were times I wanted to scream, "Don't you know people are dying of hunger? Don't you know there are little girls who are blind and in pain? Can't you see how selfish and greedy we are?"

I only have one regret about my own short-term mission trip to Africa. Simply, that although I did good, I left abruptly, severing my connection with people who needed me. I paid for the treatment of the girl with trachoma but have no idea what happened to her. With ever-shortening short-term mission, abrupt coming and going is an issue. The challenge for us in a material culture is to acknowledge that our trips can easily become tailored and pre-packaged to fulfil our needs, our schedules, our interests, our preferred destination and our projects. We can so easily measure the success of what we do by our standards, our values and our feelings. And we can so easily measure impact by what we give, or the projects we do, rather than the restoration of broken relationships and restoration of justice that Jesus modelled.

If we are to do short-term mission justly, we need to be intentionally Christlike in our efforts. Written thousands of years before the phrase short-term mission had been coined, Micah 6:8 highlighted three concepts that underpin the best missionary work: "He has shown you, oh mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require

of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Let's not forget that when we walk with the poor we are walking with God!

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