

Rethinking our Mission Trips: the role of short-term missions in the Great Commission.

By Don Johnson, Assistant to US Director at SEND International and MissionWorks Board Chairman

Should an agency that's been sending out long-term missionaries for 75 years be engaged in short-term missions? In general, fewer new career missionaries are being deployed and agency budgets are shrinking. Wouldn't it make more sense to abandon short-term and focus on recruiting, training, and deploying new long-term missionaries?

If we should stay engaged in short-term missions (STM), what changes can we make to our short-term mission program to make it more effective and financially viable? These were the questions with which SEND International's US sending office was wrestling. We organized an STM Task Force and spent six months finding those answers—at least finding the answers that seemed right for us. Hopefully what we've learned will help and inspire you.

Since the mid-1990s, SEND has processed and sent out short-term teams on two week mission trips and individuals going for several weeks to a year. But now we wondered if it was time to cut our short-term program from our lineup to better support our long-term missionary goals. What follows is a summary of how we went about our evaluation and what we learned.

FORMING A TEAM

We wanted our decision to be a well-informed one, so we established a diverse team of people and called it our task force. We brought in people across a spectrum of roles and experience in STM including a host-receiver field missionary, an STM training consultant, missionary mobilizers, and others involved in various aspects of short-term missions. Some were from our organization and some were "outsiders" who could bring a broader perspective to the questions at hand.

GATHERING FEEDBACK

The first thing the STM Task force did was send a survey to all of our long-term field missionaries who had served as host-receivers for short-term missionaries. Using a range of questions designed to draw out in-depth feedback, we basically asked if we should continue to send short-term missionaries to them. We know how much work it takes for field missionaries to facilitate short-term missionaries and we had heard short-term "horror stories" at times—despite SEND's painstaking screening and comprehensive training processes—so we wanted to know if our career missionaries felt it was worth keeping our STM program.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We received many long and detailed answers from over a dozen different locations and cultures but a clear pattern emerged. Short-term missions was appreciated by our field staff when it was a byproduct of partnership and discipleship. Our long-term missionaries clearly did not want short-term missionaries sent at random. However, they highly valued mission teams from their supporting churches and individuals who committed to come for several months or more and even desired more assistance in facilitating these (albeit with some adjustments to how we do things!).

Our long-term missionaries relish the opportunity to disciple the next generation of missionaries and church leaders. In fact, they view short-term mission trips as their opportunity to do just that. If you've ever been in one of my workshops or read one of my articles, you've probably heard me say "For a long-term mission organizations to reap the full benefit from short-term missions, long-term missionaries must learn to view short-term missionaries as lives to be disciple rather than—at worst—a hindrance to their ministry or—at best—a tool to be used to get a particular job done." I was so encouraged to hear that principle echoed from our field missionaries!

The main critique of our STM process unearthed by our task force was training. Since our program began, we have brought all short-term participants to the SEND office in Detroit, Michigan, for a week of pre-field training. The advice from our fields—as well as from our mobilizers, coaches, and former short-termers—was that on-site training was valuable for connecting office staff with participants but that the on-site portion was too long and costly. It's not that

we needed to decrease the amount of training, just find a different way to deliver it. In fact, we learned that we needed to provide more culture-specific training!

CONCLUSIONS FROM OUR EVALUATION

We made some very valuable conclusions based on feedback from our long-term missionaries, past participants, and our task force. The conclusions include:

- Cut way back on recruitment of unaffiliated short-term teams
- Focus on helping our missionaries manage short-term teams from their supporting churches
- Continue to recruit, process, train, and send short-term individuals who commit to several months for more
- Shorten our on-site training at the SEND campus to one weekend
- Move more of our training to online formats
- Develop more field-specific cultural training

While our feedback showed we could do more to absorb the cost of facilitating short-term teams and individuals, our short-term program is always going to be a “loss leader.” Our long-term missionaries made it clear that we might lose money on STM teams and individuals, but we gain much more in return—the chance to disciple, influence, and recruit the next generation of missionaries.

In the past, agencies left the molding of a new generation of missionaries and mission leaders to colleges, seminaries, and churches. One researcher has said that the typical long-term missionary today has gone on four to nine short-term trips before going long-term. The agencies that provide excellent short-term programs are the ones most likely to see the long-term commitments that result.

I know that every organization or church is different and so your situation is not the same as ours. However, as you begin to evaluate and ask questions about your STM program, you can follow the same path; form a team, gather feedback, draw conclusions, and then make steps towards change.



Don Johnson has been a missionary with SEND International since 1986; serving first as a long-term missionary and hosted many short-term teams. After that he spent 10 years as the assistant director and then director of SEND's short-term missions department. His current responsibilities include directing SEND's STM program, serving as chair for the SOE Board of Directors, speaking, writing, recruiting, researching trends in missions, consulting part-time with Missio Nexus, and providing training for both short-term and long-term missionaries. If you'd like to connect with Don you can email him at djohnson@send.org.