

A Field Guide to Better Short-Term Missions Trips

Revisiting Best Practices in a Pandemic Era

A Barna Group research study in partnership with

Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission,
The Chalmers Center, World Relief, Compassion International,
Food for the Hungry, Chinese Mission Convention,
Faith to Action Initiative, TEAM, Managed Ministries, Merge, World Orphans¹

Short-term missions trips were significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. With new travel conditions and reopenings, U.S. missions agencies, nonprofit organizations, youth ministries and churches have a unique opportunity to rethink how they re-engage: to explore pros and cons of their previous programs and establish new and sustainable approaches to short-term missions.

Barna Group, Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission and The Chalmers Center partnered with several Christian missions organizations to conduct new and unique research to guide ministries and churches as they consider how to best engage in short-term missions. This study surveyed “sending organizations” as well as “in-field hosts” about their needs, desires and pain points. In the following pages of this field guide, you’ll learn from research insights as well as some of the study partners.

Why Do We Need Standards?

Pretend there's no AAA, Expedia or Trip Advisor acting as a third-party gauge of what constitutes a two-star, three-star or four-star hotel. In a world like this, every hotel could and likely would give themselves four stars and claim to be the best hotel in town. How would you know if it's true? They couldn't all be four-star hotels, right?

This example from the world of hospitality has parallels in the world of short-term missions. While short-term missions has been around a lot longer than people think (wasn't Jonah sent on a short-term mission?), the phenomenon is fairly recent in its current form. For many years, there were few standards by which to judge a missions trip.

In the late 90s, missions leaders came together at conferences and started sharing about their experiences with short-term missions trips. Most ministries felt their trips were great—after all, team members came back talking about how their life would never be the same. Still, many had also heard stories from missionaries and pastors after the trips that made them wonder if they really were doing more good than harm.

They knew these missions teams didn't have bad intentions, but sometimes they had blind spots. These teams had the right heart, but they didn't know the right way—or, at least, a way to evaluate a trip other than the immediate impact on the team members.

After several years of studying scripture, talking to missionaries and pastors who host teams, talking to people who go on trips, consulting with similar groups in Canada and the UK, the Seven Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission were composed. In 2003, Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission (SOE) was officially launched as a parachurch organization that existed to help churches, organizations and

schools make their mission trips better by applying the Seven Standards to their missions trips and programs.

Missions trips ought to honor God, their hosts and the people they are serving, and SOE proposed a way to determine if a trip was doing that. As it's difficult to evaluate a trip based on its end result, which may take years to come to fruition, the Seven Standards proposed a process-oriented roadmap to follow when planning a missions trip. Missions trips and programs that embodied these Seven Standards could be trusted to have:

1. God-Centeredness
2. Empowering Partnerships
3. Mutual Design
4. Comprehensive Administration
5. Qualified Leadership
6. Appropriate Training
7. Thorough Follow-Through

What Difference Have Standards Made?

SOE is now 15 years old, and hundreds of leaders have learned about the Seven Standards. More than 150 churches and organizations have currently adopted the Seven Standards as Associate and Accredited Members of SOE. The Seven Standards have been endorsed by The Chalmers Center and cited in *Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions* by Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett. The Seven Standards have been adopted by denominations and church associations, colleges and universities and mission organizations that have been faithfully sending missionaries for decades. Dan Sered, Chief Operations Officer for Jews for Jesus said, "Using SOE's training materi-

als, we were able to equip over 150 volunteers to love and serve people in the city of Jerusalem.”

However, the real evidence of the impact of the Seven Standards can be found in this very study you’re reading. When we set out to hear from our brothers and sisters in the global Church who are hosting missions teams, we weren’t sure what to expect. We weren’t even sure we’d like the results! However, we were very encouraged by the response.

As you read through this report, take note of how you see the presence of the Seven Standards represented in the responses. It became obvious that the positive attitude towards short-term missions trips nearly always came within the context of the application of the Seven Standards. In some cases, the respondent was familiar with the Seven Standards and had adopted them while others were unfamiliar with them and were accidentally practicing them. Either way, while not all mission trips put the Seven Standards into practice, the ones that are applying them have favorable responses. According to Chief Operations Officer Heather Hunter, CURE International has built their whole short-term missions program around the Seven Standards because, “We know that short-term missions done well is important to the overall impact of CURE around the world.”

As the center of global Christianity has moved South and East, the material resources and positions of power have not always followed. Centuries of geopolitical animosity and colonialism have made the already difficult task of cross-cultural ministry even more difficult. Yet the Seven Standards have es-

tablished a context where God’s glory is the center of our efforts and unites us in empowering partnerships where we have the freedom to listen to one another and serve together in brotherly love. Jennyfer Valdez, a Merge Trip Facilitator from Panama said, “Meeting with the SOE staff for their training taught me a lot. Being able to listen and exchange opinions with those who were part of the training was inspiring for me. It was a very enriching experience that definitely helped to develop my short-term missions work.”

The implementation of the Seven Standards has revolutionized partnerships by giving a greater voice to the host and ongoing ministry presence. Missions efforts are more likely to serve the long-term goals of the host rather than catering to an experience for the goer and simply “painting the church” (again). We’ve seen short-term missionaries trained to do more than pack a bag—to relate across cultures by humbly serving rather than seeking glory and affirmation. Finally, we’ve seen a shift from accomplishing the task of a trip to embracing the conviction that we all ought to be missionaries in whatever setting we find ourselves—and that we’re better missionaries when we learn and work together.

Tory Ruark

Chief Operations Officer and Short-term Missions Coach
Standards of Excellence (SOE)

About the Research

This research is centered around “in-field hosts,” people who run Christian ministries around the world and who receive North American visitors for short trips. The study focused on learning from this group in order to help U.S. Christians understand how to better engage in short-term missions.

Because of this relatively narrow segment, often located in remote places or without reliable communication channels, a broad-scale quantitative study would be a significant undertaking. This study’s partners—agencies and churches who send Christians on short-term missions trips—desired more expedient feedback in order to shape trips as they resume in 2022. Therefore, a smaller sample, reached via the networks of the study partners, was obtained to glean these practical insights.

With a sample size of 130 in-field hosts, the findings were analyzed more qualitatively (e.g., “hosts’ top three priorities are ...”) than quantitatively (e.g., “48% of hosts say ...”). Reported data should be interpreted as indicative or directional rather than precise.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the participating ministries—both sending and receiving organizations—are aware of current best practices in short-term missions and have, to some degree or another, implemented them. Therefore, the attitudes and perceptions revealed by in-field hosts reflect what could be considered healthy ministry partnerships. If the scope of the research were extended more broadly, it is possible that experiences and perceptions would trend less positively.

We hope readers will give their own ministries and trips a careful review with these findings in mind.

Methodology

In-field hosts are defined as people who run Christian ministries around the world and who receive North American visitors for short trips.

A collection of ministry partners involved in this study invited their in-field partners to participate in the Barna survey, provided via an online link or email (with fill-in Word document) or administered live by a local interviewer. Interviewers were often third-party or neutral interviewers not employed by the sending organization to ensure respondents felt free to speak candidly.

Data was collected from July to September 2021, and **130 individuals completed the survey** in English or Spanish. Their locations reflect the regions most visited by U.S. and Canadian adults:

Latin / South America: 86
Africa: 31
Asia: 4
Caribbean: 4
Europe: 2

Sending ministries are defined as Christian organizations or churches that organize short-term missions trips and send groups of Christians into the field.

A total of **36 sending staff** (half from sending agencies and half from churches) provided their insights via online survey in July and August 2021. On average, respondents had been with an agency or church for nine years.

Heard from the Field

Let's start with the good news: Hosts have a great deal of positive feedback about having visitors from the U.S. and Canada.

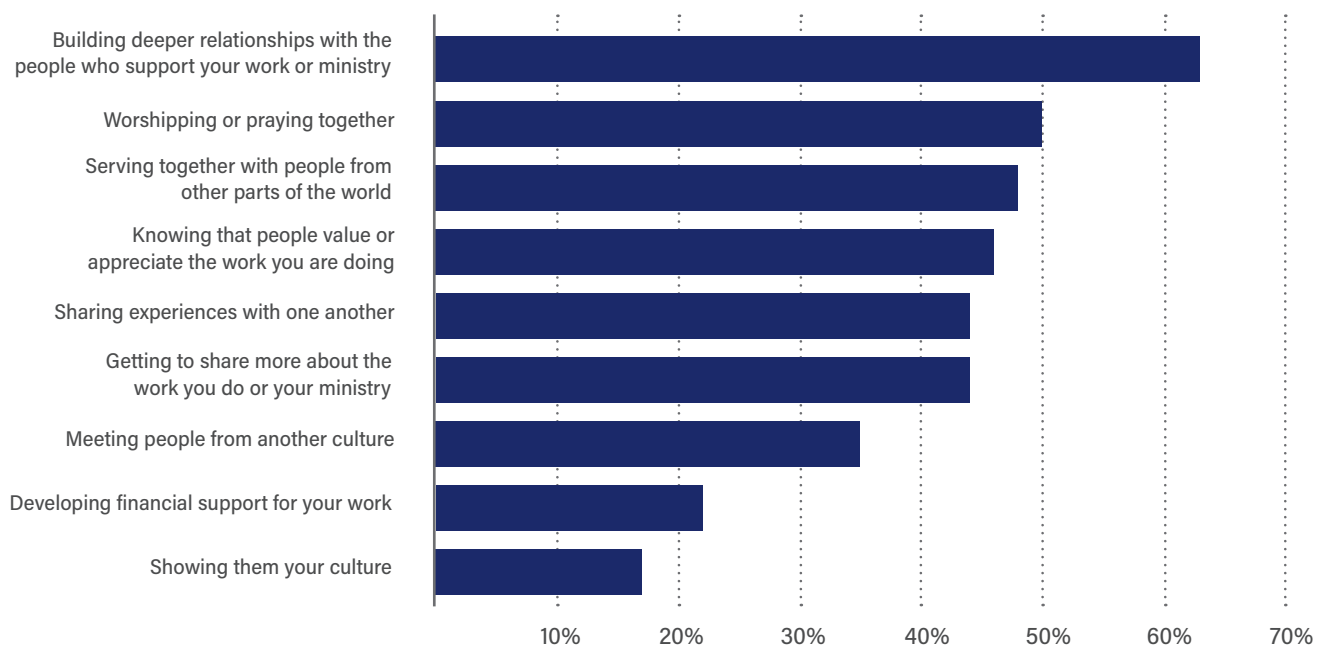
What do hosts *like* about receiving visitors?

Both in open-ended responses and prompted answers, in-field hosts cite relationship-building as the primary benefit of having visitors from other countries. This was noted by nearly two-thirds of respondents. Following closely behind, half of hosts say they enjoy worshipping or praying together, serving alongside each other, feeling valued or appreciated, having ex-

periences together and sharing more about their ministry and its work. Developing financial support and showcasing culture are not commonly cited as benefits.

Many hosts are long-term missionaries, some native and some from the U.S. or Canada, so hosting short-term mission visitors is a form of contact with their home country or, at least, Christian supporters. These visits are an encouragement to their work. As one in-field host explained, "Missional work can be lonely, especially in a Christian minority context. Having visitors reminds us we are not alone."

What in-field hosts appreciate about having visitors from other countries



n=130 in-field international ministry hosts; July to September 2021.

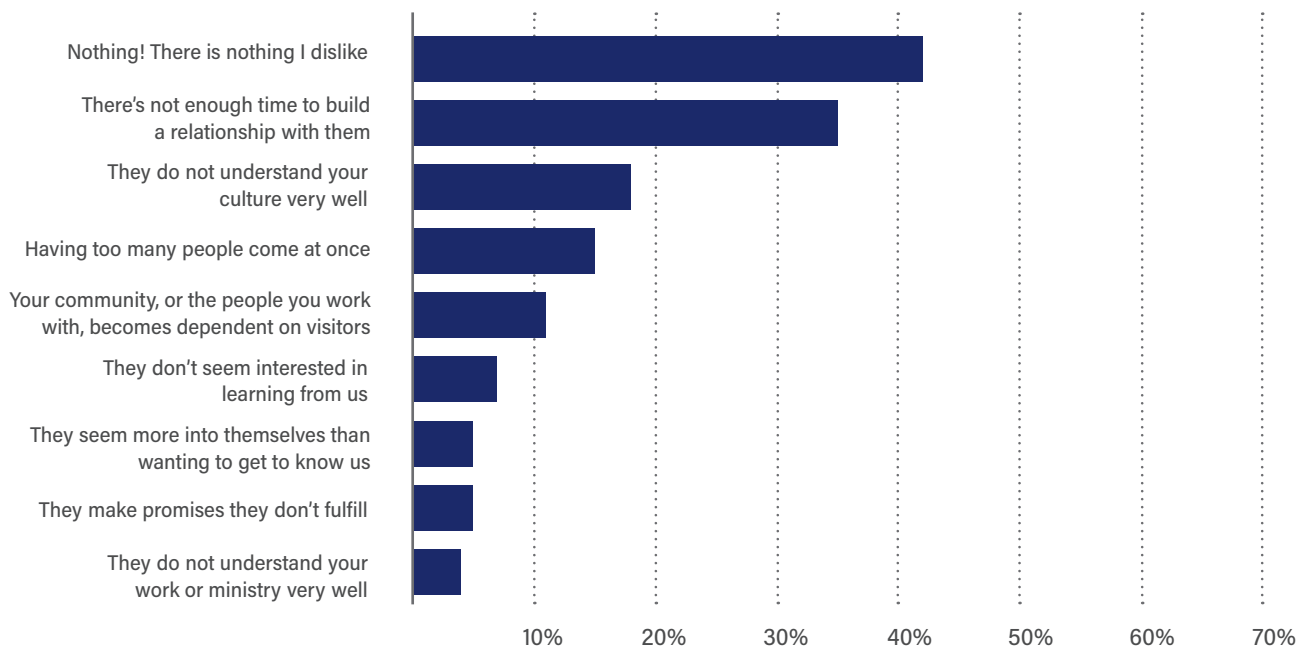
Knowing that gracious hosts may be reluctant to point out practices that fatigue or frustrate them, the researchers were careful to ease respondents into questions about what they dislike when it comes to short-term missions. However, reviewing responses across multiple question types, it is evident that most hosts genuinely appreciate visitors and have minimal gripes against them. Remember that these respondents partner with organizations that most often practice or at least aim for healthy missions guidelines.

What do hosts *dislike* about visitors?

Four out of 10 in-field hosts say there is “nothing” they dislike about having visitors; in fact, “nothing” is the most common response to the question “What do you dislike about having visitors from other countries?” Additionally, hosts point to many more likes than dislikes regarding international visitors.

Just as relationship-building topped the list of “likes,” one-third of hosts of short-term missions trip teams dislikes not having enough time to build relationship with them.

What in-field hosts find difficult about having visitors from other countries



n=130 in-field international ministry hosts; July to September 2021.

“Your presence speaks volumes.”

What would it look like if we considered a healthy presence—rather than our knowledge, resources or ideas—the most important to bring when arriving on the field?

When properly designed, short-term trips are an opportunity to learn from, encourage and fellowship with believers around the world in the context of long-term engagement with God’s work, focusing on understanding his body and our role in it more fully.

One of the primary purposes of a visit is to fellowship as equals with the believers we encounter, leading to long-term engagement with missions and poverty alleviation as we listen to and learn from these believers. Consider Paul’s command to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

God does not call his children because they are exceptional. He does not choose the perfect, the wealthy, or the influential. Healthy trips are rooted in the refrain of praise: “Let us boast in the Lord together! Let us celebrate the things He has done in our lives through Christ.” *No one has grounds to boast in their own accomplishments.* Ultimately, 1 Corinthians 1 describes an attitude of humility and mutual encouragement, not an attitude focused on fixing those the world calls “weak.”

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to listen to each other, valuing and learning from the wisdom and experiences that God has given to each of us. Believers in the slums of Kenya understand God’s provision and sustaining presence in ways that many more affluent Christians do not. African-American brothers and sisters in Birmingham, Alabama, have much to teach Caucasian believers about suffering and forgiveness. But if short-term trips are built around “doing,” accomplishing particular tasks and projects, they cannot create the time or safe space necessary for this type of listening and learning.

It is one thing to say that God uses the “weak things of the world to shame the strong.” But when we, as relatively affluent Christians, step into a materially poor community, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the needs around us. *There are homeless people living under every overpass. There is no running water. They don’t have desks in their schools—scratch that, they don’t even have school buildings.* The needs within a community appear like flashing red lights around us, and it is tempting to slip back into an attitude of “doing” and “fixing.” Focusing primarily on their needs, however real they may be, initiates the very dynamic that poisons our relationships: a dynamic that says we are superior, they are inferior, and we are the only ones with the power to change their situation.

Maintaining a “1 Corinthians 1” attitude toward our brothers and sisters requires that we proactively look for and respect the assets God has graciously placed in every community, instead of focusing on needs. As we see their gifts and abilities, we start to view them as God does, helping us overcome our sense of superiority, our own poverty of being, and laying the basis for effective learning. Going as

learner also means we seek to understand the context of our brothers' and sisters' lives. If we believe that Christ is the creator, sustainer and reconciler of all things, not just our souls, then learning about his work and his people means learning about their political, environmental, social, cultural and religious context. Part of a visit to inner-city Memphis should include better understanding how God used the church in this city during the civil rights movement. In a different vein, a team in Haiti should understand the origins and impact of Voodoo on Haitian culture and how the local church is responding to this challenge.

Learning and cross-cultural engagement is a positive outcome from visits, but going as learners does not mean that we are unable to bless or serve the people we encounter. Rather, it opens new, deeply enriching ways for us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, namely through fellowshiping with and encouraging them. The kingdom of God and the body of Christ are global, cross-cultural entities. When we fellowship and worship together, we are proclaiming to the rest of the world whose we are, and saying to each other, "I am in this with you. We serve the same God. We are saved by the same sacrifice. You are not alone." Focusing on fellowship and being together, as opposed to particular projects, also fosters an attitude of respect and mutuality in which our hosts can use their gifts.

When you read the book of Acts and Paul's letters, it is amazing how many church leaders were crisscrossing the Roman world. Paul. Silas. Barnabas. Apollo. Timothy. And they often took other believers with them from one congregation to another (see passages such as Acts 15:22–35 and Acts 18:18–28). In addition, the congregations and church leaders invested in each other over time, esteeming and exhorting one another as members of the body of Christ. These churches were from different cultural and religious backgrounds, lived under varying levels of persecution and represented a range of economic classes. They did not have video chat, email or air travel. Yet they were deeply engaged with one another. They prayed for each other, they sent greetings to each other, they longed to hear about each other's work and life. And above all, they encouraged one another.

Adapted from *Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions (Leader's Guide)* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert (©2014). Published by Moody Publishers. Used by permission.

The Goals of Hosting

What are the goals or desires in-field hosts have for receiving short-term visitors? The following are the themes relayed in their responses. Note that the goals indicated by sending organizations are essentially *the same* as in-field hosts'. This sort of alignment rarely happens by accident and is likely the product of good communication and healthy relationships between sending and receiving parties.

Hosts primary goals for short-term mission trips are to:

- Deepen relationships and continue to build them over time
- Develop prayer partners
- Provide encouragement and spiritual refreshment for everyone
- Establish financial partners
- See transformation in visitors
 - » This might mean enabling visitors to become more familiar with the ministry and culture of their hosts and generally more aware of the vulnerable. Further, a short-term mission trip has the potential to develop a deep sense of caring and help develop a pattern for engaging with the vulnerable as a practice of faith. For sending organizations, this is especially important, as they recognize many of their travelers are relatively wealthy, privileged North American Christians (after all, they have been able to fund the trip) who have a unique opportunity to have their heart shaped by the experience.
- Display the love of Christ among the groups, the local community and ministry “beneficiaries”
- Demonstrate the significance of the ministry (meaning, it is important enough to receive international visitors and support)

- Broaden the perspectives of all parties by seeing different cultural expressions of Christian faith
- Learn! Ensure that both groups learn something and equally benefit and work together, without creating dependency in the local ministry but rather empowering it
 - » The shutdown that resulted from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed to sending organizations that these ministries could function effectively without American volunteers, which was encouraging and an important reminder—to hosts and visitors—that the two are equally capable partners in ministry.
- Ensure continuity from trip to trip or project to project

Hosts share the following recommendations for effective visits.

1. **Set expectations** in advance. What does each party desire or need from the experience?
 - » Additionally, manage expectations about what is likely to be accomplished; tangible impact often doesn't happen in a short trip.
2. **Train and prepare** participants before going, perhaps by holding a pre-field orientation.
 - » Set expectations and educate participants on what is culturally appropriate, what is perceived as respectful (and disrespectful), etc. Provide training on cultural do's and don'ts.
 - » Prepare participants to respect the local culture and the organization's approach.
 - » Though the ministry is not a travel agency, it can sometimes be helpful to consider having visitors

take a tour of the country / area upon arrival to help get acclimated before coming on-site with the ministry.

3. Focus on **building relationships**.
 - » Connect virtually in advance to begin building familiarity.
 - » Make time to just be, aside from doing “work,” while on the trip.
 - » A learning mindset and humility are essential. Create opportunities for visitors to learn from hosts.
4. **Go deep, not wide.** Fewer partnerships or missions may lead to deeper relationships.
5. **Keep coming!** Partnerships with other Christians are a vital part of many ministries and an encouragement to receiving ministries.
 - » Consider an exchange, such as having the hosts come to the visitors’ country.
 - » Ongoing communication and contact, to keep growing in faith and relationship together, is a universal goal.
6. **Financially support** the work and / or specific needs of the ministry.
 - » As a rule of thumb, a group should not spend more on the trip than they give to the organization’s work.

Hosts Share Their Hopes for Trips

“Each partnership is different, and each partner has different expectations and goals, perhaps some are more selfish or superficial. Those are more challenging to work with. Cultural intelligence is often lacking and makes for difficult interactions in the community.”

“Having more time with people, which should not be just a time of construction, but also a time of sharing.”

“I wish we could have a stronger understanding of expectations; that they would view their contribution less as a service project and more as a time of encouragement. They want to serve but, honestly, to serve I need them to stay for years. I need them to speak the language.”

“[I wish there was] more pre-field orientation about working cross-culturally; a better understanding that it’s not about them.”

“Sometimes there are instances that, when they see a family struggling physically, they tend to provide an immediate response like giving a gift which ... will change some dynamics of the program’s approach. It creates confusion for the families.”

“It would be great if they could bring some gifts when they do home visits, as it is appropriate in our culture just to show your love.”

“Do not stop visiting us and be sure that your visit is very rewarding for us. It allows us to practice hospitality, in addition to keeping us alert and excited to prepare and receive them.”

“May the churches of both countries be inspired to continue in service. May priority be given to friendship and companionship. That they keep in touch, that they pray together maybe every three months, that they exchange letters, photos, that they take care of each other.”

Mindsets for Staying on Mission, Globally and Locally

By Cara Taylor

Global Outreach Coordinator for Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church (Gig Harbor, Washington)

I serve as a church-based global outreach coordinator, and the pandemic that shut down our visits pulled me in two directions these past couple years. For many of our long-term partners, in-person time together is a deeply nourishing part of their work and our growth. We have felt that absence keenly.

On the other hand, part of me is thankful for the opportunity to reboot our youth experiences. Many of us have long felt the tension of using people in another country to teach our kids gratitude and perspective. Yet we have worried about lost milestones for our teens, or seeds not planted for long-term missions work. I'll share a few ways that we have experimented during this disruptive season to shift our language and our practice around missions. I pray that God will use these mindsets to build up the global Church going forward.

Listen first.

About 10 percent of Christians worldwide live in North America, and that ratio will likely continue to spread.¹ How does this redefine our relationship to the global Church? Barna's research is a great starting point and reminder to listen first. I often start short-term team training by asking how we can see and hear people as divine image-bearers, like Jesus did. That habit precedes service. Without direct service overseas during the pandemic, there has been a chance to sit back in a listening posture.

How do our partners draw out the God-given gifts within their own communities? Are they raising up indigenous leaders? Do local pastors have access to good theological training and an accountable network? I am always trying to think of global missions on a local scale and asking how we can better support and empower people. After all, when Paul traveled around the ancient Mediterranean world sharing the gospel, he planted local churches.

Further, as our global Church family is growing, how can they teach us? In this sense, I like to talk about short-term visits not so much as "going on mission" but as missions "training" or "refreshment."

Remember that short-term visits don't "bring" Jesus.

One of the realizations people often take away from a short-term trip is the wonder of seeing how God is already at work internationally. This moves us to worship and inspires us to share our faith and walk in it right where we live.

I think that may be closer to what Jesus actually intended when he sent his disciples out. We use the term "outreach" to shake up some of the embedded mindset around missions. Think of it as stretching a hand out across the one table of the Lord and letting him reach out, through others, to change us, too.

This study reveals a high value on international relationships in our visits, and I would say this is true for our smaller adult teams. We will definitely be going back as soon as we can! But even in our absence, we experimented with more ways to connect virtually and pray regularly. One blessing of virtual visits and digital care packages has been that more people in our congregation can experience being adopted into the sense of family that we have with our partners. It is time to spur each other on and remember that we are not alone in following Jesus.

1 Zurlow, Gina A., "Who Owns Global Christianity?" December 11, 2019, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/who-owns-global-christianity/>

Rethink youth trips.

As an alternative to the massive high school rite-of-passage trip, we took the opportunity in 2021 to develop a “glocal” outreach experience. An international teacher came to teach our kids while they served in their own backyard—hearing testimonies from the prison, the shelter, the food bank and the immigrant detention center. Virtual visits with our global ministry partners were then set in the context of how we are all on mission, right where God placed us.

I have wondered if going to Mexico for training alongside the pastors doing embedded local ministry might be more appropriate for young people after deep discipleship at home. My job, then, is much more about doing poverty education here. So, last year, I took the time I would have usually spent booking flights to develop a more robust curriculum for the student ministry leaders. Already, we are seeing the seeds for vocational ministry taking root.

In 2022, we are inviting our teens to go to Mexico on a family trip instead, which we hope will be a more organic way to connect cross-culturally. It is a great opportunity for kids to see their parents’ faith in action, since they are the ones really training them up in lifelong discipleship. We are also inviting families and life groups to commit to a long-distance partner for the whole year and to serve locally.

Allow scripture to help reshape our approach.

In rethinking short-term trips, it’s important to keep rooting the Church in the global scope of scripture. Surrounding the instruction from Proverbs 22 to “start children off on the way they should go,” we find many reminders about the wealth gap.

“The rich and the poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all.”

“Do not exploit the poor because they are poor.”

“One who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and one who gives gifts to the rich—both come to poverty.”

This passage reinforces our instinct to bring kids into spaces of material disparity as part of their formation—but do any of our trips enrich our kids’ faith by *using* the poor? With all the pitfalls of adolescence, I wonder if “the way they should go” needs to be practiced in proximity, and not so much as a field trip.

In Psalm 22, the psalmist’s cry of forsakenness invites us all to express our total dependence on God, our shared spiritual poverty. The prayer then moves to the conviction, “I will declare your name to my people.” When we “fulfill these vows” to bring God into our day-to-day lives, then the poor—both those needing food and those seeking God—will be satisfied and full of praise. Ultimately, when “all the families of the nations bow down before him,” we will know that it is God’s work, not ours, that has built his global Church. As the Psalm ends, “He has done it!”

Ways to Collaborate

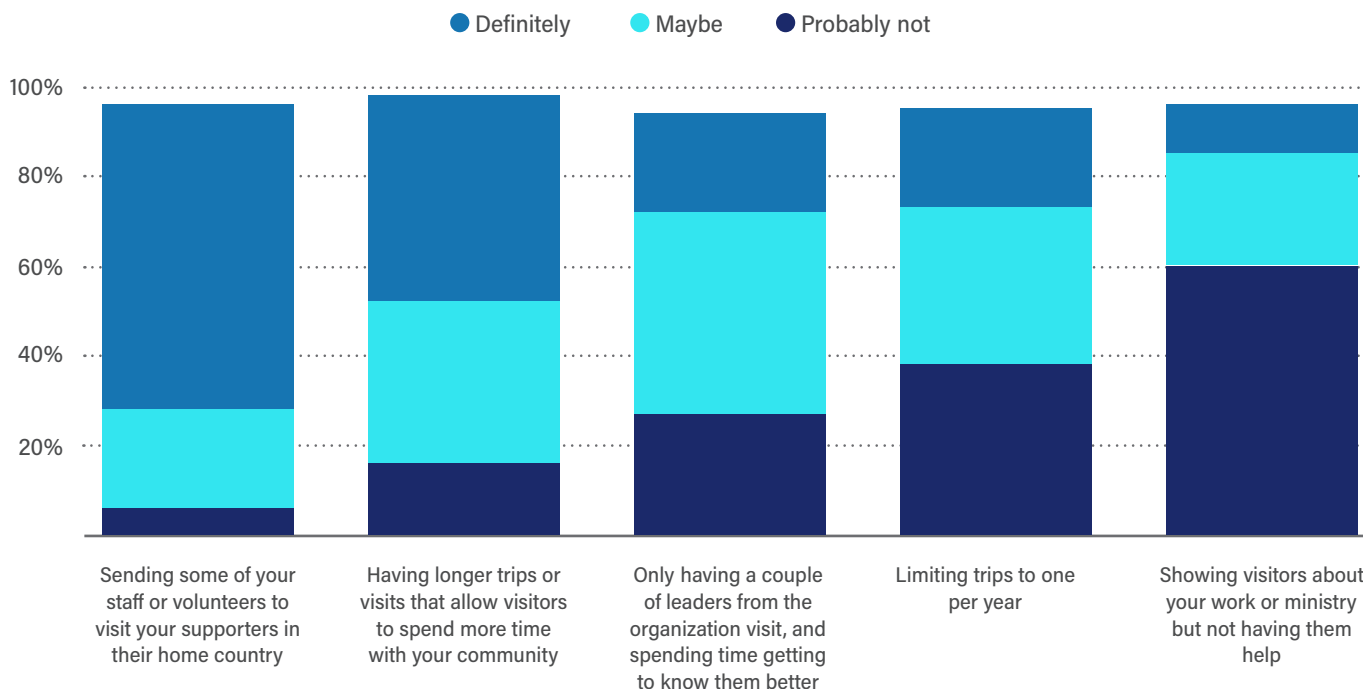
Participating hosts were presented with several new ideas for collaborating with sending organizations, many of which were piloted during the initial pandemic lockdown.

The greatest proportion of hosts expresses interest in an “exchange” program in which hosts visit supporters in their home country, with about two-thirds saying they would “definitely” like to try this out (this was also mentioned spontaneously by several hosts). Longer trips (7–14 days) are desired by one-third (“definitely”) and potentially more (one-third “maybe”).

The idea of constraining volunteer work (such as conducting tours of the ministry’s work without inviting visitors to assist) was least desirable; six out of 10 hosts are not interested in this approach. This sentiment echoes comments from the perceived benefits of trips; working alongside each other is a mutually valuable exercise.

Finally, opinions about the optimal or appropriate number of people and number of trips are mixed.

Interest in ideas for collaboration



What the Pandemic Has Changed

Nine out of 10 in-field hosts say COVID-19 has significantly impacted their work and needs. Examples include:

- “We have to do more meetings with communities, breaking them into smaller groups to allow for social distancing and managing crowds. This wearies staff.”
- “A lot of work is now done online, including staff meetings. It removes the social aspect that gives life to working.”
- “[There is a] cost implication of engaging communities / beneficiaries, e.g., in meetings we have to provide for masks, sanitizers, hand-washing, etc.”
- “The number in churches has been affected, leading to low levels of ministry.”
- “People have become more dependent on the project because of the economic challenges.”
- “The lockdown, especially of schools, has impacted us. We now need extra funding to be able to move to communities.”
- The donor relationship and visits to projects totally moved to zero, which has also had an implication on financial support. However, the process / presence of COVID also gave an opportunity for technology adoption of virtual meetings.”

Prior to 2020, in-field hosts indicate that the average number of groups hosted was around three per year, with little variance. However, the average number of people in total varied widely. More than half of in-field hosts had less than 20 visitors per year in total, but some groups had 100 or more.

- Average number of groups hosted per year: 3
- Average number of visitors per year: 33

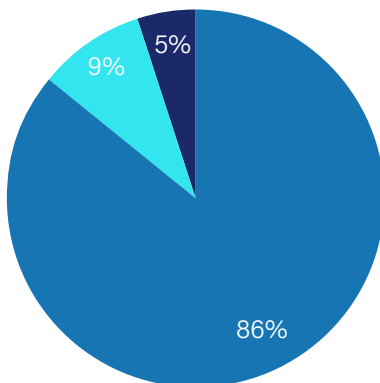
Only a handful of hosts said they had too many visitors. Most said the number was “just right” (typically the response of hosts with fewer than 40 visitors annually) and a portion wish they had more visitors.

When asked for an ideal scenario, hosts most commonly say having 10–15 people at a time, for 7–14 days, two or three times per year works well for their ministry.

The vast majority of hosts wants people to visit on short-term trips, even if they could redesign them.

If in-field hosts could redesign missions trips, would they still want people to visit?

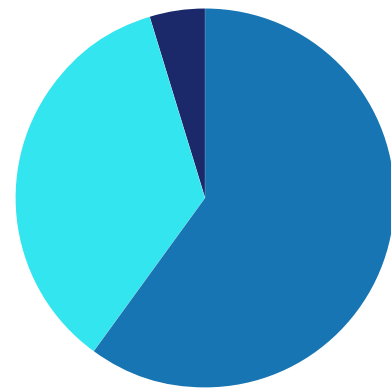
- Definitely
- Maybe
- Probably not



Tallying short-term missions trip visitors

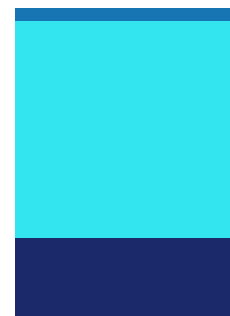
of visitors per year

- <20
- 20-100
- >100



Is that ... ?

- Too many
- Just right
- Not enough



n=130 in-field international ministry hosts; July to September 2021.

About the In-field Hosts

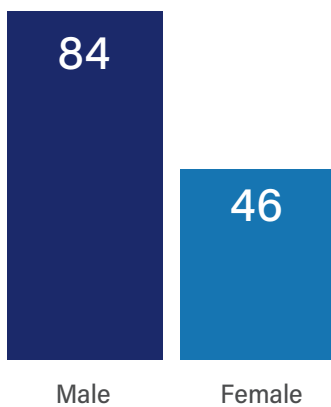
Ministry Location



Average #
of years
with org /
ministry:

12

Gender



Level of influence on
organization decisions



n=130 in-field international ministry hosts; July to September 2021.

Co-Laboring in Ministry Trips

By **Bethany Barkley**

Director of Strategic Execution, World Relief

I've heard it said that doing global missions with the U.S. can be like dancing with an elephant. In their exuberance, Americans might not realize their impact or see when they do unintentional harm.¹

At World Relief, we want to mindfully participate in partner trips, which we refer to as “ministry” rather than “missions trips.” Being careful to avoid a Western messiah or white savior complex, as it's often been termed, we guide our ministry trip participants in activities that empower local communities while simultaneously discipling trip participants into a greater understanding of God's heart for the nations.

One example: When one of our church partners learned that our Cambodia staff wanted to launch a kids' camp, they immediately saw an opportunity. Together, the church and our in-country staff co-planned a four-day kids' camp to share the gospel with children in Cambodia. When the U.S. church offered to supply balloons and face paint for the camp, our Cambodia staff politely declined, explaining that they needed to be able to purchase local supplies in the markets available in Cambodia in order to make the camp experience culturally appropriate, replicable and sustainable. Collaboration like this helps steward time, resources and impact well.

Here are a few checkpoints that ensure trip hosts and participants honor each other and work together.

Before a Trip: Plan Together

Before planning a ministry trip, we bring our U.S. church partners together with our in-country leaders to brainstorm ways to support a particular country's goals. Our focus is always on fostering mutual transformation, positioning ministry trip participants not as teachers but as students and learners.

Trip itineraries and activities are dictated by the needs of the community, eschewing dependency mindsets and intentionally avoiding opportunities that could be undertaken by locals. Unless it's explicitly on the docket of a local church's agenda for the week, participants never build a house, dig a well or hand out soup on a ministry trip. There are no made-up projects or alternative plans created. Instead, participants serve as volunteers to local churches, fostering humility and honoring local church leaders as experts on the needs of the community.

During a Trip: Bless One Another

Half if not more of World Relief's ministry trips include a staff retreat where visitors pour into the church leaders and staff in a particular area of need identified by World Relief local staff. Some of these areas have included servant leadership, marriage retreats, family strengthening, youth ministry and spiritual gifts, to name a few. We also leave lots of room for true rest and conversation, which is always the highlight of these retreats: sharing experiences and presence and simply being together.

After a Trip: Recap & Relate

After each trip, both the field staff and the visitors are surveyed for their feedback about how the trip went. From both sides we have found that the true benefits of short-term ministry trips are found in relationships.

Co-laboring together results in mutual transformation, helping us better understand that we are all part of a much larger body of believers from whom we can learn.

1 Corbett, Steve and Fikkert, Brian. *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor—and Yourself*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012.

Listening to Sending Ministries

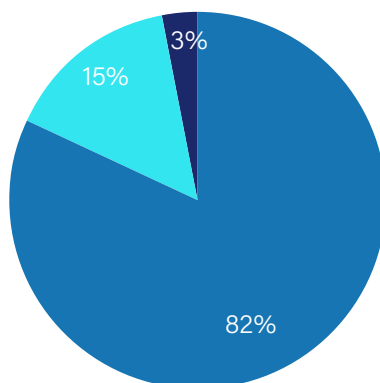
Two-thirds of sending ministries say their plans and operations changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they desire and plan to return to their previous programs when possible. The other third says their future programs and plans will change (reductions in frequency or volume of sending).

Most sending groups say Covid has impacted their trips and partner engagement both negatively and positively. They believe in the immediate future they will ...

- Send smaller groups and have smaller gatherings (for Covid safety)
- Leverage virtual communication more often, substituting *some* travel for digital engagement—though there’s still high value on face-to-face visits for relationship building
- Emphasize prayer more
- Introduce exchange trips

Still send people on trips?

● Definitely ● Maybe ● Probably not



n=36 sending ministry staff; July to August 2021.

The vast majority of sending agencies and churches will still send people to visit partner ministries on short-term trips. Senders suggest smaller groups than hosts: they *most commonly* suggest less than 10 (even just 3–4) people at a time, for a week, or in some cases, a month. Views on helping are mixed. Most desire to limit “projects,” but skilled volunteers (such as medical staff) are desirable.

Many had already made changes to improve sustainability and healthy relations with partners; Covid sharpened and accelerated that change. They desire to be more relational (people focused as opposed to project focused) and prioritize encouraging and equipping leaders, rather than spending time with children. Some are even working to organize a “spiritual retreat” for their ministry hosts.

There is more focus on visitor discipleship through developing cultural awareness, reading scripture, prayer and evangelism. Above all, sending organizations aim to be humble and learn! They are giving field partners a more central role in defining visits; engaging more as co-laborers in a shared global mission. Sending groups will continue to train their leaders and participants to celebrate the good and beautiful, not just the broken, in the community.

Senders Share Their Hopes for Trips

“[I hope] that ministry multiplies because the gospel is spreading and all are exercising their gifts. That we have transformation stories to tell of how God is renewing creation.”

“Calling them ‘missions trips’ implies that you’ll actually help the people you’re ‘serving’ on the trip, but that doesn’t happen in most cases, or [the trips] can actually be damaging (for instance, doing labor that you could have paid someone in the community to do. Framing them in a way that ‘saves the poor people’ is unhelpful to long-term development.”

“If phrased as an ‘insight or learning’ trip, a successful trip would be one where participants understand poverty / the context more thoroughly. The trip and any included volunteering were led by the community itself and legitimately furthered their long-term development goals. The trip did not reinforce dependency in any way.”

Thanks to the partners and sponsors of this research. Your work is doing a world of good.



SOE exists to help churches, organizations, and schools make their mission trips better by equipping them to implement the 7 Standards of Excellence. These standards ensure that mission trips honor God, their hosts, and those they seek to serve.



The Chalmers Center equips churches to address the broken relationships at the root of material poverty, living out Jesus' kingdom today. www.chalmers.org



World Relief is a global Christian humanitarian organization that brings sustainable solutions to the world's greatest problems—disasters, extreme poverty, violence, oppression, and mass displacement. We partner with local churches and community leaders in the U.S. and abroad to bring hope, healing and transformation to people in the most vulnerable situations.



Compassion is a child advocacy ministry that pairs compassionate people with those who are suffering from poverty "to release children from poverty in Jesus' name." Compassion has nearly 7,000 international church partners in Asia, Africa, South America, Central America and the Caribbean.



Chinese Mission Convention: Walking alongside Chinese heritage churches to be unleashed together for God's global glory.



Food for the Hungry is a Christian nonprofit organization dedicated to ending poverty—one community at a time. With partners like you, FH walks alongside the most vulnerable communities throughout the developing world as they strive toward sustainability.



The Faith to Action Initiative serves as a free educational resource for Christian groups, churches, and individuals seeking to respond to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children around the world.

MANAGED MINISTRIES is a nonprofit organization focused on creating great software for ministries, including managing short-term mission trips.



TEAM partners with the global Church in sending disciples to make disciples and establish missional churches to the glory of God. Our goal is to see your church partner with churches around the world to see the gospel shared everywhere.



World Orphans equips, inspires, and mobilizes the Church to care for orphaned and vulnerable children. Our Home Based Care program focuses on family preservation through addressing and preventing the rise of the orphan population by caring for children in their home environments.



Merge - the Global Church invites you to participate in what God is doing around the world. merge.covchurch.org