

Increasing the Effectiveness of Short-Term Missions

Making a Bigger Difference in the Harvest Itself

by Eric Swanson

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Overview:

Article Summary

In 1965 there were 540 individuals from North America involved in short-term missions in various locations around the world, according to one estimate. Today, by conservative estimates, upwards of one and a half a million Americans are involved in international short-term mission outreaches each year at the cost of billions of dollars annually. Churches find themselves asking questions like, “Is it worth it?” “How can we get better in the execution of short-term missions?” “What should we be measuring?”

Further Reading

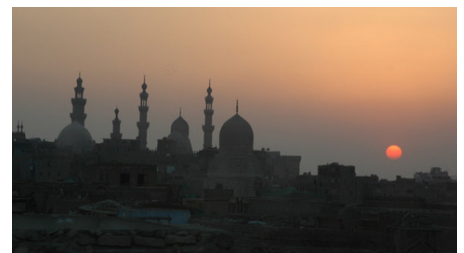
[Nine Game-Changers for Global Missions: Trends That Shape the Future](#) by Eric Swanson

[The New Role for Western Missionaries](#) by Eric Swanson



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These questions are particularly important as the method of short-term missions has largely unchanged over those same years. Leadership expert Peter Drucker reportedly said, “Any organization that fails to change at the rate of the world around it is doomed

Short term missions are “the God-commanded, repetitive deployment of swift, temporary, non-professional missionaries.”

to failure.” While God never changes, nor the gospel itself, should the way we approach short-term missions?

The Effectiveness of Short-Term Missions

When we talk about short-term missions, what do we mean? One of the simplest and most minimal definitions comes from Roger Peterson, founder of the organization Short-Term Evangelical Missions Int’l (<http://www.stemintl.org>): Short term missions are “the God-commanded, repetitive deployment of swift, temporary, non-professional missionaries.” A strong historical case can be put forth on the

efficacy of short-term missions, starting with Jesus’ itinerant ministry. Having no place to rest his head, rarely staying anywhere for more than a few days, he fully accomplished the mission the Father sent him to do (John 17:4).

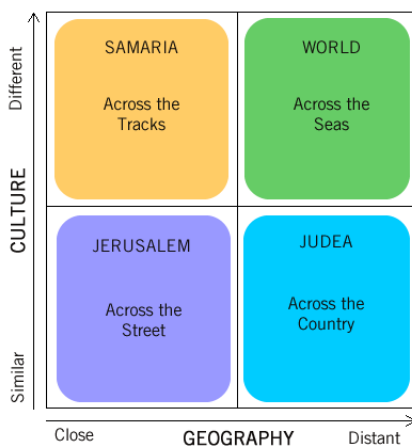
When Jesus entrusted a mini-commission to his twelve disciples, he sent them on out on a short-term mission. His mini-commission had a specific purpose and a specific audience (Matthew 10). Like the twelve short-termers, Jesus sent out another seventy-two (Luke 10) as transformational short-termers into the cities where he himself would soon be ministering. The apostle Paul’s ministry is recorded in the book of Acts as three missionary journeys through four different

provinces and two different continents. His longest stay in any one place was the two years he spent in Ephesus. And yet in a span of ten years he planted multiple churches in scores of cities.

We owe much of our Christian heritage to Paul's short-term efforts. When Jesus gave what is now called "the Great Commission" in its various forms (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, John 21:20, and Acts 1:8) the mission was clear: The people of God were to be a sent, missional people, sharing the gospel and making disciples wherever they went.

Crossing an ocean or crossing an international border is not necessary for a Christ-follower to be "on mission."

To establish the context of short-term missions, look at the following visual depiction of Acts 1:8



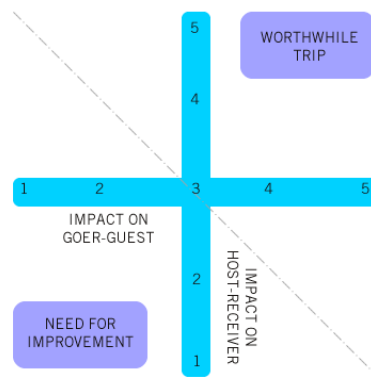
Global missions is part of a larger missional strategy. Short-term missions is a part of a larger global missions strategy.

We are the missional people of God – and sometimes we

go overseas. All followers of Jesus received this commissioning at their conversion.

Getting Better at What We Do

Churches are figuring out that regardless of the current state of their missional efforts, there are things we can do to improve the outcomes in the lives of those who go (the goer-guests) and in the lives of the recipients (the host-receivers)¹. Providing a construct helps us think about where we are and where we want to be.



On every short-term mission it is possible to measure the impact on the goer-guest and the impact on the host-receiver. By having a numerical scale, with "1" representing little impact and "5" representing a lot of impact, we have the ability not only to measure where we are but also determine what steps we need to take to improve. The ideal short-term experience, which had a great impact on those who go and those who receive, would be a perfect "10." So a composite score that is "7" or above would reflect a worthwhile trip with at least some positive impact on the goer-guest and host-receiver. Any composite score of "6" or below

begs the need for improvement. This short-term missions matrix can be used for individuals and then collectively for groups.

Tough Questions

What does a "1" represent and what does a "5" represent for both the vertical and horizontal vectors? For example, a "5" for the goer-guest could be "A good time was had by all and no one got sick." A "5" for the host receiver is that the local missionary got his house painted.

STEM's Roger Peterson points out that because short-term missions are often led by youth pastors, the trips follow a common pattern. Too many of them result in little missional impact on the host-receivers because of the trip objectives didn't include that dimension. Instead, it's tempting for the youth pastor only to set goals around the goer-guests:

- The youth have a good time
- The youth get some basic discipleship
- The youth return home safely

In other words, a trip can be viewed as "successful" even if nothing positive happened in the lives of the host-receivers.

A Better Measure

At a recent Leadership Network gathering for missional leaders, participants were asked what the numbers on the scale represented. Determining what the end cap goals for both goer-guest and host-receiver was quite challenging for all of the churches but in the end they came up with some great metrics.

Other churches making some interesting discoveries of what a "5"



For a good example, watch Adam Weatherby of Atascadero Bible Church in Atascadero, CA, (www.abcchurch.org) explain what they discovered.

might look like for the goer-guest included Bent Tree Bible Fellowship in Carrollton, TX (www.btbf.org). Leaders there described a “1” as “missions pornography” where returning goer-guests would show a lot of photos of people in distress but do nothing about it. A “5” was measured by their personal response to the world’s needs. Atascadero Bible Church identified a goer-guest “5” as “individual transformation measured by time, talent and treasure.”

Perimeter Church in Atlanta, GA (www.goperimeter.org) identified the goer-guest “5” as demonstrated change in how they view God, themselves and the world. Perimeter defined a host-receiver “5” as “increased capacity for sustainable impact.”

Crossroads Christian Church in



Crystal Stamberg of Perimeter Church shares her thoughts on sending short-term teams who increase the partner’s capacity for sustainable impact.

Cincinnati, OH (www.crossroads.net) defined “5” as a place where people recognize their world view, their world view is challenged, an alternative kingdom world view is presented and where people pursue the kingdom. When considering what a “5” looks like for the host-receivers Mariners Church in Irvine, CA (www.marinerschurch.org) defined a “5” as a situation where “their vision, not ours, is central and where sustainable, relational, reciprocating life change and learning together occur.” Mariners adopted the discipleship material from their Kenyan partners and has 1,500 people engaged in the discipleship process.



Matt Olthoff and Christian Mungai of Mariner’s Church talk about the power of mutuality.

The Crossing in Costa Mesa, CA (www.thecrossing.com) defined a “5” as a place where “their kingdom cause is advanced and their hearts are encouraged.”

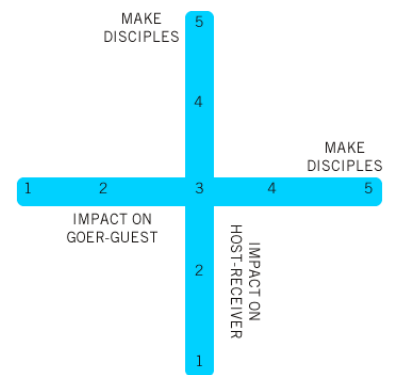
Common Denominators

Answering the end cap question was not an easy assignment for participants to answer but consensus seemed to lean toward characteristics of certain outcomes. For the host-receiver, it has something to do with advancing the *host-receiver’s* goals and for the goer-guest it has something to do with re-arrangement of life’s priorities.

Here’s another, broader approach. Let’s take look again at Matthew

28:18-20. The best interpretation of the passage begins, “As you are going, make disciples....” What if Matthew 28 provides the answer of what we are to do for ourselves and others on short-term mission outreaches? As we are going we are to become more of a disciple, making disciples, or helping others make disciples of Jesus. After all, shouldn’t we be doing and measuring against what Jesus asked us to do? A “missions” trip after all should, by definition, include the mission Jesus sent us to do. Everything we do—evangelism, building projects, acts of charity and mercy, back-yard Bible clubs, prayer walks, etc.—should be in service to “making disciples.”

This is not to say that there is not value in “vision trips,” “cross-cultural exchanges,” construction projects, etc., but to call something a missions trip or missions outreach, by definition, should include the mission of making disciples. Now we have something to measure against—for the goer-guest and for the host-receiver. How does this missional experience help make disciples?



How Do We Move up the Scale?

All participants at the Leadership Network gathering agreed there were

See page 8 for a list of videos in this paper and where to view them.

identifiable things we could to move up the scale. Even if we scored a “4” on the goer-guest vector, we have to ask, “What could we do to move it to “5”?”

There are three factors that seem to make a difference for the goer-guest and the host-receiver? The first is **preparation**. Roger Peterson and others have long recognized the three phases of a missions outreach—Pre-trip, On-site, and Post-trip.

Bob Schneider from **The Chapel** in Akron Ohio (www.the-chapel.org) emphasizes the importance of listening to those they are going to serve. “We want to come as servants to help whomever we are serving to reach their goals, not our goals.” Scott White of **Lake Avenue Church** in Pasadena, CA (www.lakeave.org) says the best pre-field training involves “listening to them before we explore doing anything with them.

On the field “we put our people in the position of learning more and leading less when we are on site with our partners.” Many of the churches had journals and devotionals for goer-guests while they were on the field and met each evening for debriefing. For Nancy Wilhelm of Bent Tree Bible Fellowship, pre-trip preparation comes from “asking our partners abroad what needs they have before we ever send a team out to meet those needs.”

The second factor is **relationships**. The quality of the experience is based on the quality of the relationship between the goer-guest church and the host receiver. The stronger and more trusted the relationship, the more both sides benefitted from the missional exchange. The most effective engagement was ministry “with them” as opposed to ministry “to them” or “for them.” Churches agreed that their most effective paradigm was short-term trips in the context of a long term relationship. Finally, the number one variable on any missions outreach is



The quality of the short term mission experience is also based on the quality of the relationship between the goer-guest and the host receiver.

the quality of **leadership**. Good leaders make or break a good short-term experience.

Go into All the World by Connecting to the Internet

Technology can greatly enhance the impact of global missions and make it possible for people to impact the world from their homes. Steve Cooper from the Crossing has been involved in Global Media Outreach (GMO) for the past few years (www.globalmediaoutreach.com).

GMO has created 100 websites in all the major languages in a way that allows people who are searching for God or for answers to life’s big questions to connect with an opportunity to know Jesus Christ (www.greatcommission2020.com).

Up to two million people each day search for God on the Internet and upwards of 45,000 indicate decisions for Christ with 5,000 a day requesting follow-up contact from a Christian. As an engineer Steve was skeptical of these statistics. To assuage his skepticism he led a follow-up project of 8,514 people who had indicated they had received Christ on the GMO site from 6-18 months previously, hoping to learn if the decisions were valid. He discovered:

- 87% were sure of their salvation
- 44% read their Bibles daily
- 63% attend a fellowship gathering weekly
- 58% pray more than ten minutes a day
- 57% had shared the gospel with three or more people

The benefits to the goer-guest--the online missionary--were equally positive:

- 96% of the online missionaries experienced an increased vision for global missions
- 98% are more confident to talk about their faith with others
- 100% felt used by God

During our Leadership Network gathering of missional leaders Steve took us through a live online follow-up with a young woman from Iran who wanted to know more about Jesus and what it meant to be a Christian. It was pretty amazing. Because the goer-guest and the host-receiver communicate on line via a secure server, the online missionary has the chance to think through answers and can refer to a cached answer-bank of over 200,000 answers to questions, or turn the question over to a group of professional

theologians and apologists. This approach is like a no strike-out bat for global missions.

Now imagine the congregational impact of global missions if four or five times a year the senior pastor did a live follow-up of a new believer from a closed country. What would happen if each small group had a GMO champion and once a month instead of doing what small groups normally do, the group put their collective minds and hearts together and followed up a few new believers or a few inquiring Christians as a group? We can regularly go to the world without ever leaving our living room. Technology changes everything. For further discussion of this idea see the church-wide GMO video.

An Ongoing Conversation

There is no evidence that short-term missions are going away anytime soon.

But veterans of short-term missions are discovering that we don't have to do short-term missions as we've always done them, especially in the level of benefits received by the host-receiver. We have the capacity not just to do well, but to do better by increasing the effectiveness for the goer-guest and the host-receiver, especially through the use of technology.



Steve Cooper leading a live online follow-up with a young woman from Iran who wanted to know more about what it meant to be a Christian.

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Additional Resources:

Journeys to Significance: Charting a Leadership Course from the Life of Paul by Neil Cole (Jossey-Bass, 2011)

Video Resources:

Adam Weatherby, *Atascadero Bible Church, Atascadero, CA*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYMwn9IWq1k>

Matt Olthoff and Christian Mungai, *Mariner's Church, Irvine, CA*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD0n0UB7DA8>

Crystal Stamberg, *Perimeter Church, Atlanta, GA*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOv7P_F12cU

About Leadership Network

Leadership Network’s mission is to accelerate the impact of 100X leaders. These high-capacity leaders are like the hundredfold crop that comes from seed planted in good soil as Jesus described in Matthew 13:8.

Leadership Network...

- explores the “what’s next?” of what could be.
- creates “aha!” environments for collaborative discovery.
- works with exceptional “positive deviants.”
- invests in the success of others through generous relationships.
- pursues big impact through measurable kingdom results.
- strives to model Jesus through all we do.

Believing that meaningful conversations and strategic connections can change the world, we seek to help leaders navigate the future by exploring new ideas and finding application for each unique context. Through collaborative meetings and processes, leaders map future possibilities and challenge one another to action that accelerates fruitfulness and effectiveness. Leadership Network shares the learnings and inspiration with others through our books, concept papers, research reports, e-newsletters, podcasts, videos, and online experiences. This in turn generates a ripple effect of new conversations and further influence. Leadership Network is a division of OneHundredX, a global ministry with initiatives around the world. To learn more about Leadership Network go to www.leadnet.org.

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About the Author

Eric Swanson, the Director of the Global Connections Leadership Community for Leadership Network. He is the co-author of *The Externally Focused Church* (Group Publishing, 2005) *The Externally Focused Quest* (Jossey-Bass 2010). Eric and his wife Liz have three grown children and reside in Colorado.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.

Endnotes

¹ We thank Roger Peterson of STEM Int’l. for popularizing these terms. Though some may argue that in this world of mutuality, goer-guest and host-receiver are obsolete, it is difficult to explain the goer and guest apart from these terms. We also recognize that in today’s globalized world of mutuality, these roles are often interchangeable.

Additional Resources:

Want to find more resources like this one? For the most current listing of free and purchasable resources, including books, papers, videos and podcasts, go to leadnet.org/resources.

[Nine Game-Changers for Global Missions: Trends That Shape the Future](#) by Eric Swanson

After interviews with 50 leading missional leaders engaged in global outreach the following nine trends emerged that could shape the future of missions: cities, mutuality, partnering, investing in leaders, combining good news and good deeds, greater financial accountability, business as mission, focus, and technology.

[The New Role for Western Missionaries](#) by Eric Swanson

Global Missions is changing, according to Eric Swanson, director for Global Connections Churches Leadership Communities at Leadership Network. The centers for Christianity have shifted globally from the West to the South and East. Globalization and the affect of technology on have changed missionary work but we still need to continue to search for the unreached peoples of the world.