

First Do No Harm: Toward a Philosophy of Ministry for Short-Term Missions

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Time was when there was little question about how the work of taking the gospel to the nations would be done. Denominations had world mission boards in their organizational flow-charts. The mission boards called theologically-trained men as world missionaries, commissioned them, and sent them to their fields of labor, where it was understood that they would serve until the Lord determined otherwise. The boards made sure that missionaries had the tools they needed to do their job and that the mission families' needs were provided for. Congregations back home were kept informed of the Lord's blessings on the work through the denominational newsletter. Occasionally, they might have the chance to hear a missionary on furlough as a guest speaker. For the most part, the average pew-sitter's role was to stay informed as best he or she could, to pray for missions and missionaries, and to support them with generous offerings.

Today, across Christian churches, these assumptions have changed dramatically. For better or worse, many members are not satisfied with sending and supporting others who do the work in their stead. They seek involvement that is less institutional, more personal, more hands-on. For most of these mission-minded Christians, becoming a career missionary isn't practical or desirable. Taking a "mission trip" is.

A desire for more personal involvement is undoubtedly a major reason for the growth in short-term missions, and it has been explosive. In fact, the short-term mission movement has been described as "wildly escalating and often times out-of-control."¹ According to one source, just 540 North Americans were involved in short-term missions in 1965. In 2003, one report concluded that "considering just the 40,000 U. S. sending agencies alone, it is probable that our estimate of one million short-termers is far too conservative."² A veteran African missionary remarked to me that the other Christian agencies in his area have largely replaced their mission teams with a handful of career missionaries who supervise crews of short-termers.³ Today the Christian Church in the West spends roughly as much money on short-term missions as it spends to send and support career missionaries.⁴

There are other Christian agencies—even single congregations—with vastly more experience in this area than we have in the WELS. Our own body of experience is growing, however. Projects Timothy and Titus have now provided short-term mission experiences for a large number of young people. Various projects funded through WELS Kingdom Workers have made these experiences available to people at nearly every stage of life.

Although one sending agency acknowledges a certain "faddishness" in short-term

1 Daniel P. McDonough and Roger P. Peterson, "Can Short-Term Mission Really Create Long-Term Career Missionaries?" quoted in Susan Looble, "Short Term Missions: Is It Worth It?" <http://www.lam.org/news/article.php?id=109>.

2 Peterson, Aeschliman and Sneed, *Maximum Impact Short-Term Missionaries* (Minneapolis, MN: STEMPress, 2003), 255, quoted in James Pressnell, "From Who, What, and Where to Why: Developing a Congregational Mission Strategy," *Missio Apostolica* vol. 15, no. 1, p 31.

3 Among other things, one wonders how this can possibly be cost-effective.

4 Tim Dearborn, *Short-Term Missions Workbook* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), p 9.

missions,⁵ they are at least as old as Jesus sending out the 72, and they are not going to go away. There is also no question that they hold great potential for blessing. But if that potential is to be realized, short-term mission projects need to be thought through very carefully. This article will attempt to provide grist for some of that thinking-through, by inviting reflection on three questions about short-term missionaries:

1. Why are we sending them?
2. Whom do we send?
3. What are we sending them to do?

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## 1. Why are we sending them?

Put another way, "Our short-term mission projects are intended to benefit *whom*?"

There need not be only one answer; in fact, there should not be. A well-designed short-term project can bring blessing to nationals (both national church members and the community at large), career missionaries on the field, the individual who participates, his or her home congregation, and the entire denomination or synod. Among experienced sending organizations, however, there is a strong consensus that in practice it is usually the short-term missionary him- or herself who benefits most.<sup>6</sup> This is the great paradox of short-term missions: while they usually are (and need to be) designed to serve the needs of the mission field, in practice, the real beneficiaries are the short-termers who participate.<sup>7</sup>

The potential benefits to them are significant. There is, first, a more global perspective. It is healthy to be brought face-to-face with the fact that the lifestyle enjoyed by 21st-century North Americans is not the norm, but a grotesque aberration when compared with the way that most of the world lives. There is benefit in being faced with a language barrier that cannot be surmounted by a year of high school Spanish. Many short-termers also come to realize for the first time that a very large portion of the world's population has already heard John 3:16 in some form or other – and yet it remains as hopelessly lost as ever. They may come to appreciate the fact that the work of world evangelization is both more complex and more desperately needed than they had previously supposed.

Even these benefits to the participating individual are not automatic. It has often been observed that some of the most, profoundly ignorant persons about a foreign country are tourists who have been there, and yet whose contact with the host culture was superficial. They return to North America ignorant in a Socratic sense; that is, they imagine that they understand what in reality they do not. Such compounded ignorance is the predictable result from this short-term mission experience, advertised in a church bulletin:

[Our congregation] is sponsoring a women's only mission trip to beautiful Guadalajara, Mexico! We'll spend the week of June 11-18 in Guadalajara (also known as the shopping capitol of Mexico!), where we will have the incredible

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5 Seth Barnes, "Cost-Me-Nothing Missions," <http://www.sethbarnes.com/index.asp?filename=costmenothing-missions>.

6 See e.g. "Why Short-Term Teams?" <http://eh.robis.net/uploads/JID44 AWhySTTeams.pdf>

7 A missionary friend aptly observes, "If ministry were the only consideration, probably more could be done in less time for less money in the local nursing home."

opportunity to minister to, pray for, and teach women in a vibrant church community. And this trip isn't a "rough-roach-in-your-bed" kind of experience either – we'll be housed in nice clean hotel rooms, eat lots of salsa, and have plenty of time to shop! Our hope is to take at least fifteen women (including teenage daughters) on this Mexican Ministry Outreach ... we trust that God will expand our hearts for Him as He expands our ministry to the women of Guadalajara. If you're remotely interested in this great commission adventure—or if you're just in the mood for Mexico after all this winter weather—call for more details about this fantastic outreach opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

The warning signs here are legion: the blanket invitation; the promise of shopping, warm weather, and "lots of salsa;" and the assurance that participants will be isolated in "nice clean hotel rooms" where they are unlikely to interact with the Mexicans to whom they hope to "minister." The extremely short duration of the trip is also telling. If the objective is to achieve some measure of cross-cultural adaptation and competence, a one-week experience would be of very limited value. It takes most persons from several weeks to a several months to pass through the "tourist phase" of their experience,<sup>9</sup> to come realistically to grips with their new situation, and to make meaningful and lasting changes to their worldview.

It is essential that participants in short-term missions think soberly and realistically about the contribution they will make on the mission field. If they do, they will avoid the most frequently-mentioned negative feature of short-term missions, one that endows them with an ability to do harm rather than good. Call it the "Here we are, you lucky people!" syndrome.

As part of this program a group of Americans and Canadians came to Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) where I lived and worked. About four weeks into their six-week visit the group suddenly left. I heard about their premature departure and went to the building site to ask what happened. Since they were from North America, I thought it was good to learn why they left early. The local builder in charge of the project gave the following explanation: What the Americans didn't know is that we here in Africa also know how to build buildings.... But they must remember that we built buildings before they came, and we will build buildings after they leave. Unfortunately, while they were here, they thought they were the only ones who knew how to build buildings. Finally things got so bad, we had to ask them to leave.<sup>10</sup>

The participants in this project seem not to have grasped that its purpose was not primarily to put up a building, but to build relationships in order to share the love of Christ. In terms of this purpose the project was a disaster. As it often is, the culprit was the North Americans' deeply-ingrained sense of superiority. It manifests itself benignly, in the firm conviction that "these people need our help." As this example demonstrates, however, this conviction is not always seen as benign by those on the receiving end. St. Vincent de Paul said, "Unless the poor know we love them, they will never forgive us for helping them." If the "poor" sense that we do not respect them, the result will be the same.

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8 Quoted in Glenn Schwartz, "Maximizing the Benefit of Short-Term Missions," <http://www.wmausa.org/page.aspx?id=83545>.

9 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p 75.

10 Schwartz, op. cit.

But if short-termers aren't going overseas to help, why send them off at all? Are we saying that short-term projects benefit only the participants and have no real contribution to make to the mission? Not at all. We are saying, first, that a realistic awareness that, despite his or her best intentions to the contrary, the participant is likely to receive much more than he or she will give should be a prerequisite for a short-term missionary. Second, it is possible for a project genuinely to benefit the work on the field, but this doesn't just happen. It requires careful planning in conjunction both with the career missionaries and with national leaders. We will return to this subject in Part 3; first, more needs to be said about the type of individual who is a good candidate for a short-term mission project.

## 2. Whom do we send?

I have intentionally referred to short-termers being "sent," as opposed to their simply picking up and going where and when they please. There are several reasons for this. One reason, of course, is that AC XIV applies also to short-term missionaries. If an individual is going to teach the Word of God on behalf of the Church, it is necessary that he or she be *rite vocatus*.<sup>11</sup> While in other Christian communities "I feel called there" may be all the qualification that is necessary, the same is not true in the Lutheran church. Additionally, in view of the risks of short-term missions, candidates should expect to submit to some kind of selection process, and the criteria must include more than availability and willingness.

For what do we select? A certain level of idealism is desirable, but humility, maturity, and plain common sense are indispensable. Not every candidate possesses the requisite humility to place him- or herself under the nationals on a foreign field and learn from them—particularly when everything about their material culture shouts "Inferior!" to his or her North American ears. Not every candidate grasps that it is not only naive, but also somewhat arrogant to believe that one can plunk oneself down on a foreign field and immediately be an unmitigated boon to the work of the mission. Not every candidate is perceptive enough to be aware of the impact that a crew of short-termers will inevitably have on the career missionaries' daily agenda, and to seek to mitigate that impact as much as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, certain personality traits can equip an individual to ride out the storms of "culture shock" and to deal effectively with conflicts that will arise. Janet Bennett speaks of four of these: 1) selfawareness, 2) nonevaluativeness, 3) cognitive complexity, and 4) cultural empathy.<sup>13</sup> Individuals with a strong sense of who they are—above all, of who they are in Christ—will be less likely to regard the new and different as threatening. They are also likely to be aware of their own culturally-derived assumptions and, therefore, able to examine them critically in view of what they will learn.

A strong sense of self can be a drawback, however, if it is coupled with rigidity. Here what Bennett calls "nonevaluativeness" becomes important. This does not mean a politically-

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11 The calling process may, of course, be very informal. The important thing is that they not call themselves.

12 In particular, many short-termers seem unaware of how limited their ability to function independently will be in many parts of the world if they don't speak the local language. Experience with short-termers with deficiencies in these areas may be a prime reason that career missionaries tend to take a more jaundiced view of short-term missions than do either participants or sending agencies. See Kurt Alan Ver Beek, "The Impact of Short-term Missions: A Case Study of House Construction in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch," <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/staff/kurt/journal%20article3.doc>.

13 Transition Shock: Putting Culture Shock in Perspective," in Milton J. Bennett, ed., *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1998)

correct "non judgmentalism" that refuses to call sin "sin," or to recognize and label false doctrine as such.<sup>14</sup> It means that the candidate does not immediately leap into "judging"-mode when faced with something new. The candidate is aware of just how little he or she really understands about the host culture on first arrival and is willing to suspend judgment, at least for a while. This trait goes hand-in-hand with "cognitive complexity," or tolerance for ambiguity. Persons whose range of mental categories is limited to "good" and "bad," or who experience high levels of anxiety in situations that they do not fully understand and cannot control, are not good candidates for cross-cultural ministry regardless of the duration of the assignment.

The final trait Bennett mentions is "cultural empathy." Empathy has been defined as "the imaginative intellectual and emotional participation in another person's experience."<sup>15</sup> This kind of vicarious participation cannot take place, of course, until one understands the host culture well enough to project him- or herself into it accurately. It requires an ability to imagine, not just how one would feel in a certain situation, but how one would feel if he or she were a person from the host culture experiencing the situation, with the host culture's worldview taking the place of his or her own. The complexity of this task is one reason that, while learning a new language looms as a new missionary's most formidable task initially, most seasoned missionaries agree that achieving cultural empathy is much harder. For a candidate to grasp the concept of cultural empathy and agree that it is a worthy goal is already a positive step. Conversely, those persons least likely to succeed are those who minimize the difficulty involved—those who feel that "people are just people" and that the nationals' reality can be adequately interpreted in terms of their own.<sup>16</sup>

To these four traits mentioned by Bennett, many seasoned missionaries would add a fifth: "a sense of humor." This doesn't mean that a candidate is thought of by his or her peers as a "funny person." In fact, that can be detrimental. What is necessary is a candidate who does not take him- or herself too seriously. One must be able to laugh at him- or herself along with the nationals when one says or does any of the many ridiculous things that learners of a new culture inevitably say and do. Once again, a lack of godly humility—especially a culturally-derived "superiority complex"—will make this quite impossible.

Once candidates are selected, careful preparation will increase the likelihood of a positive experience. Orientation could include a discussion of "culture shock" that helps the candidate know what to expect. It can be helpful, for example, to know that intense emotional "high's" and "low's," especially shortly after one arrives on the field, are within the realm of the normal.<sup>17</sup>

Orientation should certainly include training in the necessary skills to be an effective "participant/observer" in the host culture.<sup>18</sup> This kind of training is much more useful than presenting detailed characterizations of what the people of the host culture will be like. Rather than promoting understanding, this can actually inhibit it, by furnishing the candidate with an arsenal of ready-made stereotypes that will then go in search of confirmation (and will generally find it). A few tips on how to avoid an obvious faux pas might be useful—e.g., "Don't show the sole of your foot to a Southeast Asian," or "Don't walk down a Brazilian street eating a

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14 Incidentally, the kind of romanticism that insists on seeing nationals as existing in a blissful state of pre-technological innocence can be just as harmful. Judgmentalism includes the prejudice that everything non-Western or different is inherently good.

15 Janet Bennett, *op. cit.*, p 215.

16 *Ibid*, p 221.

17 Useful resources could include Dearborn, *op. cit.*

18 See e.g., E. Allen Sorum, *Change: Mission and Ministry Across Cultures* (Milwaukee: WELS Outreach Resources, 1999), p 144-162.

sandwich." But it would be even better to use searching questions about the candidate's own culture in order to invite reflection on how others might do things differently ("How close do you stand to somebody when you talk to him or her?" "How many times per week do you think it is normal for a grown man to visit his mother?").

Following a short-term mission experience, participants should also be debriefed carefully. One reason is that it is genuinely helpful to those who structure these projects to know how they could be improved. Another reason is that, returning short-term missionaries often have a need to share their experiences with someone who understands, which they may not find in their network of stateside friends and acquaintances. Sometimes they will need a safe place to talk through their disturbing experiences and achieve some kind of resolution. Depending on the length of the project, it may also be wise to prepare them for some of the issues that returning missionaries typically face.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, returned short-term missionaries are often filled with "mission zeal" that the sending church would be wise to find a way to share more widely. These purposes for debriefing aren't always compatible, and more than one kind of debriefing session in more than one setting may be wise.

### **3. What are we sending short-term missionaries to do?**

Designers of short-term mission projects show amazing creativity. There is tremendous variety in what short-term missionaries do, from canvassing to running children's camps to drilling bore-hole wells to building churches to teaching English. Some projects are directly connected to the means of grace. Others are simply ways of showing Christian love to brothers and sisters around the globe. What is needed is not for someone to formulate a list of "acceptable" and "objectionable" types of projects according to his lights. What we need are some philosophical principles for how projects should be chosen and planned.

James Pressnell<sup>20</sup> lists a number of missiological principles that would be extremely useful in short-term project design. Several of these are listed below; my own comments will follow.<sup>21</sup>

1. We won't define the projects ourselves. Rather, we will listen to the strategy used to meet the ministry needs of our missionaries and national churches, and then work with them to shape mission projects that meet their ministry needs.
2. We will not foster dependency on North Americans by our national church partners.
3. We will not do any mission project for a missionary or national church partner; we will only do mission projects with a missionary or national church partner.
4. We will only do projects that transfer skills or build nationals' capacity to do ministry on their own.
5. We commit ourselves to a servanthood model of mission and ministry. It is not about us and our goals; it is about them and their goals.

*1. We won't define the projects ourselves.*

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19 See e.g., Craig Storti, *The Art of Coming Home* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1996).

20 *Op. cit.*, p 34f.

21 For an alternate approach that leads to many of the same conclusions, see "Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission," <http://www.stmstandards.org/standardsoverview.php>.

In designing a project we certainly should take into account the special abilities and interests that a group of prospective short-termers brings to the table. But it is the needs on the field, not the hopes and dreams of the short-termers, which must be decisive in choosing a project. Good short-term mission projects are conceived and executed in order to further a coherent, well-thought-through mission strategy that is in place on the field. Bad projects are either unrelated to or at odds with the field strategy.

This might appear to be a matter of simple common sense. But in my own days on foreign fields, we were approached more than once by stateside agencies that had a ready-made plan for a project that they wanted to try—and about which they were very enthusiastic. When the project was a poor fit with field strategy, we had to turn them down. If the mission team had been asked in the initial stages, "We have manpower and resources available, and we would like to help you. Can you suggest some ways? Can we work together on a project design?" not only would an awkward situation have been avoided, but there would have been a good opportunity for productive ministry.

*2. We will not foster dependency on North Americans by our national church partners.*

Another incident occurred in West Africa where a short-termer was working in a two-year assignment. She served in an area where a medical doctor—turned church planter—was trying to get a local congregation to increase their awareness of missions and evangelism. He was elated when the pastor reported that their annual missions conference increased the total offering from forty-five dollars last year to sixty-one dollars this year. It was truly a time for rejoicing. The congregation even began to plant a new church some kilometers away. As the short-termer was about to leave, she took pity on the congregation and gave them what amounted to her life savings—six thousand eight hundred dollars—to build a new church building. Imagine, the impact of that sum of money thrust into a situation like I just described. The result was that the pastor simply began to ask where he could find more of that kind of money.<sup>22</sup>

It seems churlish to criticize the compassion that motivated the young woman's gift. And yet, imagine how the career missionary felt as he watched years of careful stewardship training go down the drain.

As any parent knows, providing help without stunting growth toward independence is a delicate task. It is not any easier when the recipient is not a child, but an adult. The difficulty is compounded further when the recipient comes from a different culture, making it extremely unlikely that an offer of help will be perceived in exactly the way it is intended. Career missionaries spend years trying to sort out these issues, and I have yet to meet one who claimed to have them resolved. This makes it imperative that short-termers and sending agencies consult vigorously with the missionaries on the ground, who must deal with the long-term consequences of their actions.

*3. We will not do any mission project for a missionary or national church partner; we will only do mission projects with a missionary or national church partner.*

Another incident occurred in Guyana, South America. A missionary told how he

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22 Schwartz, op. cit.

had taken a group of young people from North America to Guyana to build a church building. After three weeks of dedicated effort, the building was at last completed and presented to the local people. The North Americans returned home convinced that they had made a good contribution to needy people. Two years later the missionary, now back in the USA, got a letter from the people in Guyana. It read, "The roof on your church building is leaking. Please come and fix it."<sup>23</sup>

Missiologist Roland Allen once lamented: "We have done a great deal for our converts, but very little with them." Where this is true, it is easy to account for an absence of any sense of ownership on the part of nationals, which Schwartz illustrates above ("your church building"). This in turn prevents a mission project from having any lasting impact, resulting in a repeating cycle of frustration on the part of sending agencies. It is common to hear persons connected with missions ask, "Why won't these people follow through with any of our projects?" To ask the question is to answer it.

Part of the solution would be to involve the national church, not only in carrying out the project, but even before it is conceived. In *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*,<sup>24</sup> William Easterly surveys a long list of massive foreign-aid projects that have accomplished nothing and notes several features that they have in common. One of these is the unwillingness on the part of planners to make themselves accountable, not only to donors, but also to the recipients of the alleged "aid." In other words, they failed to ask the "helped" what kind of help they needed and wanted and, afterward, whether the project really did help them.<sup>25</sup>

Easterly's advice: Travel to the host country. Talk to the people. Find out how they see their own needs. Find out what is preventing them from meeting their needs themselves (Do not assume that it is as simple as lack of money). Then, together with them, design and implement a specific, manageable project that will meet a need that they agree is real. Afterward, determine whether the project met the need and make adjustments as necessary. The application to short-term missions would be: design and implement nothing apart from heavy collaboration with the national church, and be willing to submit to their critique when the project is finished.

*4. We will do only projects that transfer skills or build nationals' capacity to do ministry on their own.*

The story is told of a missionary in Central America who was surprised to hear that his sponsoring congregation had bought a four-wheel-drive vehicle that would soon be delivered to him for his personal use. The congregation hoped that it would enable him to travel much more efficiently through the remote areas that he served. The missionary didn't know what to do. He hated seeming ungrateful, but finally he wrote to the congregation and tactfully explained that he had spent years carefully training a group of national evangelists for outreach into the jungle. "If I accepted your gift, he explained, "the message I would send would be, 'You need a vehicle like this—and the money to afford one—in order to spread the Gospel.'" Although the vehicle would have made the missionary more efficient in the short-term, in his judgment it would have

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23 Ibid.

24 Easterly's book deals primarily with economic aid, but the applications to gospel ministry on the world field are often direct. This should be required reading for anyone connected with world missions.

25 One survey of over 40 studies of short-term missions done over the past 20 years found that nearly all of them have been based overwhelmingly on the North Americans' evaluation of their projects. Only 2 actually bothered to ask questions of the nationals among whom the short-termers did their work (Ver Beek, op. cit.).



compromised his ability to "transfer skills or build nationals' capacity to do ministry on their own." Because skill-transfer was crucial to the strategy on his field, the missionary had to refuse.

The point is certainly not to cast aspersions on those missionaries who make the decision to use four-wheel-drive vehicles (or laptops, or cell phones), or to suggest that skill-transfer cannot take place unless missionaries "go native." The point is that short-term missions can also interfere with missionaries' efforts "to build nationals' capacity to do ministry on their own."

For example, missionaries may spend years grooming a national to teach Sunday School, only to have a short-termer move in and ask to take on this assignment. She enjoyed teaching Sunday School back in the States, and she is eager to see what it would be like overseas. The national is hardly in a position to object (or perhaps is just as happy to hand over the job) and says nothing. The short-termer returns to the States with a bushel of photographs of her receiving hugs from smiling children. The sending agency hears her glowing reports and concludes that the project was a success. Once more, the missionaries grimly return to Square One.

Instead, what if the project began with the national church identifying Sunday School as an area of importance to their ministry, but one where they wanted and needed help? What if the sending church responded with a short-term mission that involved sending a teacher-trainer, and perhaps some North Americans to mentor and work alongside the nationals? What if progress was measured by how many qualified national teachers were produced—and once a high-quality staff was in place, the project designers turned their attention to another area of need? Skill-transfer would have taken place. Partnership, not long-term dependency, would be the likely result.

*5. We commit ourselves to a servanthood model of mission and ministry. It is not about us and our goals it is about them and their goals.*

We have arrived, again, at the great paradox of short-term missions: in practice it is often the participants themselves who benefit most, but short-term ministry projects that are not designed to serve others do not qualify as "ministry." It is my contention that, as interest in short-term missions continues to swell and projects proliferate, we must "hold the opposites" (Carl Jung). The tension between these two principles must be embraced, not overcome. On one hand, if short-term missionaries wish to be more than "spiritual tourists," they must be prepared to roll up their sleeves and get dirty, both literally and metaphorically. If they are not, they cannot legitimately claim to represent him who came "not to be served, but to serve" (Mt 20:28). On the other hand, they must also be humble enough to come as learners who realize that they stand to receive much more than they give. Not just short-termers, but any mission personnel can wreak havoc on a field if they are unwilling to "consider others better than [them]selves" (Php 2:4)—even those whose culture they may have been conditioned to see as inferior.

Actually, every disciple of Jesus is already familiar with the paradox. Each of us has experienced firsthand that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). And yet, if earning the blessing is the motive, no real "giving" is taking place. A philosophy of ministry for short-term missions might begin with a lively appreciation of both truths.