

Short Term Missions and Helping Well

Dollar spending on short-term mission trips in the U.S. has grown 20-fold in the last 20 years; for 2006, this figure stood at \$1.6 billion.¹ A key question arises when church missions and service projects are viewed through the lens of *helping well*: Where the goal is transforming communities by empowering them for self-sufficiency, how do church-based short term missions measure up? The answer depends on the extent to which best practices for helping well are utilized.

As outlined in the main article, those best practices, or signs of helping well, would include the following:

- *an orientation towards transformational change*
- *a long term, holistic approach that addresses the full range of issues impacting the communities they serve*
- *a commitment to addressing underlying causes, not just surface symptoms*
- *key words like community development, sustainable, self-sufficient, community-driven*
- *a commitment to “working with” as opposed to “doing for”*
- *a priority given to relying on indigenous peoples for local leadership*
- *insistence upon community participation, ownership, empowerment, and capacity building*
- *evidence of the importance of relationship building in their work*
- *a visible commitment to going about their work with the poor in Christ’s name, to working along side the local church wherever possible, and to proclaiming and showing the Love of Christ for all peoples.*

In as much as helping well focuses on community development to provide sustainable solutions to the problem of extreme poverty, short-term mission projects are typically found to be incompatible, by their very nature, with best practices for helping well. As noted in *When Helping Hurts*, “Development is a long-term process, not a two week product.” The majority of short-term missions work seeks to produce tangible results in a very short period, and so defaults to a *doing for* approach which discounts the critically empowering contributions that the poor can bring to the process, thus reinforcing and deepening their dependence.² This is the precise opposite of the participatory development model that helping well is based upon. Though obviously and sincerely well intended, much short-term missions work simply suffers from inherent constraints that preclude the transformative results that helping well seeks.

A second consideration has to do with the cost. It has been noted that best practices rely heavily on the talents and hard work of indigenous leaders who facilitate the process of transformation. “The money spent on a single STM team for a one to two week experience would be sufficient to support 12 far more effective indigenous workers for an entire year.... The profound stewardship issues here should not be glossed over.”³

This is not to say that church-based short term missions have no place in our efforts to serve those living in extreme poverty – they are well positioned to perform two vital functions. First, short-term trips can indeed help well when they come along side of organizations engaged in long term development work in a poor community. These organizations may be indigenous, or they may be highly professional parachurch operations with extensive experience in helping well. Short term missions that are purposefully coordinated with the work of such organizations can contribute effectively to the long-term transformation being sought in these communities.

Second, short term missions can serve as an effective means to build support for serving the least and the last. In this scenario, the real work begins upon team members’ return home, as they advocate for the transformative work being done by the host organization, generating both interest and much needed funds. In many cases, these advocacy efforts result in an active partnership between their church, the host organization responsible for facilitating development, and the poor community seeking to work its way towards a self-sufficient future. The resulting sense of purpose and genuine connections between communities can have a truly revitalizing effect on the donor church at the same time that the recipient community is helped along the road to transformation.

These partnerships can show our Church at her very best, as she honors God’s heart for the least and the last.

¹ When Helping Hurts, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, 2009, Moody Publishers

² Ibid; for a full treatment of considerations relating to short term missions work, see Chapter 7

³ Ibid; pg 173