

# The view from the *other* side

## What international workers are saying about receiving short term mission teams

One of the greatest lay movements of recent times is the involvement of the community of faith in short term missions trips (STM). Some estimate this to be 1.6 million US church members annually travelling abroad on STMs; the statistic for Canadian church members is certainly equally striking.

As a movement, STMs are predominantly organized around Christian travelers going from highly resourced countries to places with fewer resources. It is largely a lay movement of voluntary unpaid labor aimed at meeting perceived human need.

“STM is the mobilization of the church in the power of the Holy Spirit to join in God’s action in the world. Its purpose is to announce God’s kingdom through brief trips with specific ministerial activities”. (Priest, 278)

As to benefits of STM, a long term worker in Hong Kong judges that 80% of the STM is about what the traveler receives and 20% is about what the hosting ministry receives. (Priest, 85) If this is accurate, some could conclude that STMs are mostly self-serving even though team members go overseas with a very sincere desire to make their best possible contribution.

While much of STM work still takes a scattered approach with one time visits to far-off places where someone on the team has a connection, long term value is beginning to be seen when a short term team ties into a long term team with repeat visits over the long haul. The impact in the host country is enhanced when a pre-existing relationship with an international worker from the home church is strong.

A group of international workers (IW), recently returned from overseas, met in Calgary to talk about short term mission best practices. This group came up with several concepts which represent their point of view. It could be said that theirs, then, is the view from the receiving side, the view from the *other* side.

**1. A useful STM is one which supports the strategic goals of the host ministry.**

When asked what “strategic” looked like, these international workers mentioned helping with evangelism, participating in the development of lay pastors, involving themselves with children’s outreach (and thus modeling ministry for the local church), teaching in English camps and helping build key relationships, reaching out to university students, doing prayer walks, evangelizing, coming as medical teams to help achieve a field strategic community health goal.

It was viewed as a bonus if there was already a relationship with the international worker, if some team members spoke the local language, and/or if a church pastor or elder was on the team. And it was deemed foundational for the team to have a solid prayer base.

## **2. A useful STM is a well prepared team.**

A well prepared team doesn’t have tourism as a goal; rather team members have a clear vision of why they are coming. They have developed good communication with the host person or team and because of good pre-trip communication with the field and upon arrival they have a good understanding of the exact nature of their role as a team. It is understood to all what are STM team responsibilities and what are field team responsibilities. STMs do not presume on the host.

A well prepared team has adequate orientation. They have done their homework in learning about the host country and they have begun to pray for the target population or unreached people group they will be visiting. They will also have developed some cultural intelligence (Livermore). They trust the host team to make final decisions as to what their contribution will look like. IWs in creative access countries, particularly, need to determine what the team’s contribution will look like on the ground; having the STM team decide the agenda simply doesn’t work in most cases because of the sensitive nature of some of these ministry locations.

Additionally, they will have done the work of bonding as a team and dealing with relational issues as they spent time together in prayer and other bonding activity before traveling. A useful team is one that is able to take care of itself. It takes time on arrival for field orientation and cultural sensitivity training. It was noted that good teams have an authority structure and everyone is clear on who is the team lead person.

A useful STM does adequate fund raising. They not only calculate their personal costs but are cognizant of field and hosting costs. They come with extra funds for field emergencies. Some have suggested the appropriateness of including a 10% line item in all STM budgets which would go to a field approved special project or to the Global Advance Fund to support the local IWs and the long term mission.

### **3. Right timing, right size, right capacity, right duration.**

International workers appreciate having input into the calendaring of the team. In the cycle of team life on the field, there are good, better and best times to receive visitors. It can be awkward if a church writes and says, hey, we are bringing a group to your field the second week of February. The view from the other side is that it works better for a church to be in contact ahead of time to say they are planning an STM and would like to know a good time to come.

Instead of the church deciding on numbers, “We are bringing 11 people,” the IWs would prefer being asked the preferred size of a given team. This is often a question of capacity dictated by field transportation and lodging and, in some cases, security concerns because of how large groups of foreigners can attract attention which may or may not be desirable depending on the area.

Thirdly, IWs like it when churches ask in advance for input on what field needs exist so that the capacity and gifting of the STM better matches hosting team needs.

While normally trip durations are determined by the available time of the STM participants and usually fall in the one to two week timeframes, IWs expressed that they have also had positive experiences when one or two people stayed for longer periods as in a month or three months to fill a certain need. This type of STM should not be discounted. An example would be an IT person who could spend time going from worker to worker to help with computer training and upgrading.

Short term mission trips are a great and effective way of expanding the kingdom. Church groups can all enhance the effectiveness of their trips by giving heed to the view from the *other* side, the receiving side.

Further help:

Livermore, David. Serving with Eyes wide open: doing short-term missions with cultural intelligence. Baker Books, 2006.

Priest, Robert, ed. Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right! William Carey Library, 2008.

The Guide to Best Practices in Short Term Missions. Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, 2009.

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