Finding the Blessing

Should short-term mission activity consistently be expected to bring a blessing to the “home” churches involved? Many who return from volunteer mission trips overflow with enthusiasm for a time. Sometimes the enthusiasm spreads to others. Some may trace genuine life changes to participation in a short-term mission. Reports of blessings at home from mission trips have centered around these encouraging events. On the other hand, there are individuals who have misused mission travel, and churches where the enthusiasm has quickly subsided. The blessing was less distinct in those cases. The blessing of missions, in other words, does not appear consistent. It may be because the desired blessing is unrelated to the activity in question. Or if there is some link between the human activity and the desired blessing, perhaps particular circumstances or conditions must be in place before a blessing will be realized.

If indeed the realization of a blessing is predictably conditional, what are those conditions? In order to answer that question, it will be useful to examine the nature of the anticipated blessing. If for example the blessing of mission trips is expected to be heightened enthusiasm, activities may be uncritically arranged to generate that result. People may get what they desire, but a high level of enthusiasm is often only temporary.

Consider the practice of “payment in kind.” The usual form of payment for goods or services in Western cultures is money which in itself is not similar to most goods or services. By contrast, payment in kind exchanges goods or ser-
VICES OF SIMILAR PERCEIVED VALUE. LETTUCE MAY BE EXCHANGED FOR POTATOES, FOR EXAMPLE, OR LAWN CARE FOR PAINTING. NOW APPLY THE SAME PRINCIPLE TO THE EXPECTATION OF A BLESSING ASSOCIATED WITH SHORT-TERM MISSIONS. THE WHOLESOME ENTHUSIASM GENERATED ON A MISSION MAY BE USED TO MOTIVATE VALUABLE ACTIVITY AT HOME JUST AS THE MONEY RECEIVED BY SELLING LETTUCE MAY BE USED TO BUY POTATOES. BUT WHEN THIS IS THE CASE, ENTHUSIASM IS SERVING AS CURRENCY, NOT AS PAYMENT IN KIND. IT IS POSSIBLE TO REALIZE A BLESSING FROM MISSION TRIPS THAT TRANSFER DIRECTLY FROM THE MISSION ACTIVITY TO THE HOME ACTIVITY, SOMETHING LIKE TRADING LETTUCE FOR POTATOES. ENTHUSIASM IN ITSELF MAY BE A VALUABLE PRODUCT OF MISSION. BUT WHEN THE RESULT OF A MISSION TRIP IS EXPECTED TO BE AN “IN KIND” BLESSING, PEOPLE ARE CLOSER TO IDENTIFYING THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THAT BLESSING MAY BE ANTICIPATED.


THE HOLY SPIRIT WORKS . . .

principles governing the Gentile churches he submitted to the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28-29). He entered and left mission territories at the command of the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:6-10). He extended the gift of the Holy Spirit to new converts (Acts 19:1-6). There can be no doubt that the Spirit of God was the motivating and directing power in the mission activity of Paul. To the extent that Paul may be taken as an example in missions, God’s blessing may reasonably be expected to coincide with missions that are motivated and governed by the Spirit of God. This means that the characteristics of those missions will reflect the principles by which the Holy Spirit consistently works in mission. The “in kind” blessings returning to the home churches from those missions will likewise reflect and extend the Holy Spirit’s principles of operation.

... in the whole person

The gospel message we proclaim has direct impact on the schedule we keep, the words we say, the food we eat, the integrity of our relationships, the way we handle our material resources, and every other aspect of life. The more fully this fact is reflected in the approach we take to short-term missions, the more accurately we will be proclaiming the gospel. Traditional evangelistic lectures may include insufficient emphasis on practical living issues to connect in a meaningful way with audiences outside the Western world. Mission activities may be designed to illustrate a spirituality that affects the whole person without an unnatural distinction between the “spiritual” and the “material.” Such an approach may include activities such as physical health instruction or screening, instruction in principles of Christian relationships of various kinds, instruction in principles and practices of stewardship, discussion of family issues, and service projects.

If a mission trip is designed to address the whole person, then those who have participated in the mission trip will have more exposure to the whole-person concept. They will understand better than most Westerners, both through their preparation and through their contact with others in the world who naturally think in those terms, how Jesus offers real change in everyday life. From that point on those members of the home church will find it unnatural to present the gospel to their neighbors in a one-dimensional “spiritual” package. They will be far better prepared to connect with the daily lives of their neighbors in a meaningful way. This is our first example of a genuine blessing “in kind” deriving from a mission trip.

... through distribution of gifts

The apostle Paul provided perhaps the most concise sum-
mary of human activity in support of the mission of Christ and driven by the Holy Spirit. He three times specified the end result of that activity as the growth or edification of the body of Christ (Eph 4:12, 15, 16). His summary of the means to that end is a reference to the harmonious operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:11). We can find no better means for arranging and distributing the responsibilities of short-term missions than through reference to the demonstrated presence of applicable spiritual gifts among those who would participate.

Believers who are encouraged to work within their own spiritual gift areas will be far more likely to return home with sharper skills in those areas.

My research did not include a formal evaluation of spiritual giftedness and its relation to participation in short-term missions. Among those who have been active in such missions, however, I have observed a trend of general lack of regard for this issue. Participation in a mission trip is often associated either with construction labor on a church or school property or preaching an evangelistic series. This means that several other spiritual gifts are not apparently considered relevant to missions. In general terms, anyone in good standing with the church who is willing to try building or preaching may be considered qualified. In the case of preaching in particular, this means that willingness matters more than giftedness. The activity is not seen to require the gift. Yes, God qualifies those He calls, but not every call from God is a call to preach. By defining much of our short-term activity in terms of preaching, we either exclude those with other gifts, or motivate eager volunteers to work in an area in which they are not gifted.

In an ideal mission project those with gifts relevant to out-

reach in the target area will be encouraged to apply those gifts in that area. Teachers will have an opportunity to teach. Healers will be directed to those in need. Those whose strength lies in helping others will certainly be active. Believers who are thus encouraged to work within their own spiritual gift areas will be far more likely to return home with sharper skills in those areas. When mission is defined as preaching, the home church may well find that its returned missionaries have indeed preached in public but are
ungifted speakers and unaware of where their real strengths lie. This is a recipe for frustration. When spiritual giftedness is the framework, the home church will more likely see the blessing of the mission experience taking root in every department of the congregation’s work.

... through united believers

Central to Paul’s description of the operation of the gifts of the Spirit is the concept of unity (Eph 4:13, 16). Taking unity as a characteristic of relationships between individuals and groups, we may say that unity is a concern of mission activity at every level at which people and groups interact in that activity. Three primary levels of activity and interaction may be identified: between members of a group traveling on a mission trip, between the traveling group and their home congregation, and between the traveling group and the congregations and/or church workers in the host area.

In practice there is significant room for growth in the establishment of unity. Many who are present and working at the same mission event meet for the first time on arrival in the host country. Some may meet at departure time at the home airport and have the benefit of a few hours’ travel time learning to work together. This is the result of an invitational approach to short-term missions rather than a congregational approach. All you have to do is call or sign up on a web page, and you’re on the “team.”

The invitational version of mission also distances the traveling group from the home congregation. Our most active promoters of short-term missions will accept groups that come from the same congregation, but the center of gravity is in the promoting organization, not in the home congregation. In effect, congregational involvement is of secondary importance. To be sure, some congregations choose to engage actively in a mission organized and conducted by a third-party organization. But if a mission team is formed and governed by an organization distinct from the home church, then the activities of that mission team are likely to be perceived as separate from those of the home church. Many members at home will be supportive, but the congregation as a whole is not always seen as part of the team.

My discussions with North Americans traveling on mission trips revealed a disturbing state of affairs in regard to their interaction with workers at the host sites. One influential volunteer mission leader characterized the Seventh-day Adventist pastors of a particular ethnic group as liars. Leaders of one ongoing mission program encountered an apparently intractable conflict between church administration and a lay organization.
in their host country. The North Americans evaluated the situation, determined that the lay organization could be trusted while the church could not, and took sides in the dispute. These mission trips for several years were all arranged through the lay organization with little or no coordination with the church leadership in the host country. My conversation with church administrators in that country revealed at worst a brief procedural dispute with the leadership of the lay organization, already being resolved satisfactorily. It appears that it is still possible for North Americans at their host site they will have learned greater respect for those with different backgrounds and different ways of approaching the Lord’s work. Members of the congregation as a whole will have experience supporting and taking ownership of an activity in which they are not directly involved. The ministry of the home church cannot help but be enhanced by these developments.

... with wise management of resources

The management of short-term mission finances is a specialized application of the principle of unity in the Spirit. It is reasonable to expect North Americans with relatively greater affluence to carry a higher share of the financial responsibility for their mission activities in less affluent regions. This may appropriately take the form of salaries for local workers both before and after their visit, to cultivate the interests raised, and of purchase or construction of a suitable meeting place for believers at the host site as needed. This form of contribution demonstrates to local be-

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lievers the interest and support of the world church and sets an example of stewardship and generosity.

Another level at which the handling of finances becomes a question of unity is at the source. In simple terms, the more the sending congregation chooses and administers the financial policies of the mission trip, the greater the demonstration of unity. Mission trips are sometimes sponsored in part by organizations not connected with a local congregation or with the traveling missionaries. Again, the focus of the trip in these cases may tend to move away from the congregation, and the trip may be seen more as an activity of the sponsoring organization. Conversely the mission may be sponsored largely by one or two relatively wealthy individuals within a sending congregation. Those who are publicly sponsoring these trips can tend to make the important decisions about timing, destination, program content and participation themselves. Though the guidance of the Holy Spirit may be proclaimed in these cases, it must be asked whether the possession of material wealth may appropriately outweigh the leadership gifts of the Holy Spirit in planning and conducting the work of the church. Surely a greater blessing will accrue to the home congregation when a greater number of local members share in both the giving and the administration of mission funds.

... where the lost people are

It is easy to grasp that short-term missions naturally involve some form of physical or geographical “going.” Of course believers must be where their intended audience is before they can connect with them. The same is true in the less tangible sense of cultural “going.” The example of Jesus is the most sublime manifestation of this principle. He maintained His own identity, yet to the fullest extent possible He became one with his intended audience. While short-term missionaries cannot hope to be fully identified with their host culture, the principle of incarnation or contextualization is crucial to their effective communication of the gospel message.

My comparison of interviews with North American mission volunteers and those in other parts of the world who played host to them highlighted a pervasive lack of awareness of the depth and nature of cultural differences. Many Americans, especially participants in the popular invitational mission trips, come home confident that they have contextualized their mission activities. They have heard of contextualization in cross-cultural mission, and they know you need to do it. Their mission organizers have handed them a sermon DVD and informed them that it was pre-
pared for third-world countries, and is therefore contextualized. But the returning missionaries cannot get over how dirty their host country was. At the same time, the indigenous Adventist workers in the host country where the missionaries worked cannot stop talking about what a shock it was to see women on the platform preaching and teaching just like men. And neither group has any clue what made an impression on the other group, or why.

Obviously no amount of preparation at home will enable travelers to walk into a new culture and find themselves in full awareness and understanding of that culture. But an introduction to the nature and principles of cultural difference might awaken mission travelers to the need to intentionally listen and observe. It might encourage them to solicit and respect the advice of local workers in the preparation and delivery of their mission messages. A much higher level of cross-cultural connection could take place. And mission workers might just return home better equipped to find effective ways to communicate with their own neighbors.

The use of technology in short-term missions is a specialized subset of the issue of contextualization. Presentations using the best technology available in the local culture may be attractive and sustainable. Presentations using technology beyond the everyday reach of workers in the host culture often draw crowds and astonishment, but are not sustainable in the local field and amount to a disregard for local culture. For example, I have heard Americans on one mission team praise God that they had DVDs to make quality pre-

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When asked about needs that Americans might best meet in the mission field in question, local leaders without hesitation ask not for projectors but for used books so that more pastors might receive a higher level of theological training.

... through human learning and experience.

Short-term mission volunteers would benefit from some rudimentary level of training. Practical training could include exposure to basic concepts: what is mission, what is our message, what is culture, what is unity, how is short-term cross-cultural mission best carried out? The statement seems straightforward enough. But it does not happen on a consistent or frequent basis.

I was interviewing a group of Adventist mission volunteers with several trips to their credit, and I asked them what kind of training was provided before their trips. One of the leaders replied that they did not need training because they had the Holy Spirit guiding them. On another occasion I had just completed a fifty-minute presentation summarizing some of the principles described here. A man volunteered that he had participated in twenty mission trips over the years, and that he had learned more in the past hour than in his preparation for those twenty trips. Popular mission organizers and participants rejoice that they have DVDs and prepared scripts so that anyone can be an evangelist, while the recipients of their efforts ask that we instead send people who know how to preach and to connect with their audiences. Responses from union and conference administrators and departmental directors across North America in the course of this research have reinforced the impression I have received from conversations like these. We have somehow developed a denominational subculture in which training and the operation of the Holy Spirit in the work of mission are perceived to be mutually exclusive.

If training and the Holy Spirit do not go together, why are we sustaining so many ministerial training institutions? More
to the point, if the Holy Spirit does not employ training, what is the function of the spiritual gift of teaching? If training is inappropriate among those with spiritual gifts, why are the books of Timothy and Titus still in our Bibles? And what was the function of the schools of the prophets, and the meaning of discipleship in New Testament times? Training is indeed one of the tools God uses. Those with wisdom and knowledge are to challenge and sharpen the practices of even the experienced workers. Those with greater experience are to guide and instruct those with less experience. This is God’s principle, and this must be integrated into our short-term mission activities. Those who have learned to order their efforts in this manner will again naturally bring the blessing of that experience back to the daily lives of their home congregations.

The perspectives and skills involved in planning and conducting short-term missions in accordance with the Holy Spirit’s principles of operation coincide with many of those needed to carry out the work of any congregation. Conducting mission in this more thoughtful manner will often generate enthusiasm, but that is not the primary blessing. More importantly this approach to short-term missions will shape the perspectives and methods of the home congregations more to resemble the mission agenda of the Spirit of God. This, in any language, will be a welcome blessing.

Note
The mission training and planning program I developed bore little resemblance to any published approach to short-term missions available at the time, with the exception of the mission trips sponsored and promoted by The Quiet Hour. (See The Quiet Hour Handbook for New Way of Life Evangelistic Campaigns. Redlands, CA: by the author, n.d.) Since the bulk of my research was an evaluation of short-term missions against the principles I had developed from the Bible, any references I might provide would point the reader to interviews with individuals and churches whose attitudes and activities I seek to constructively criticize in this article. These interviews are fully documented in my dissertation; I have chosen in the text of this article simply to refer to my research in general terms.

Works Cited