"Good Going"

By Troy Fitzgerald

God isn’t looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him—Hudson Taylor

The true greatness of any church in not how many it seats but how many it sends!—Unknown

What inspired C. T. Studd to become a missionary was a message posted on a placard in Liverpool announcing, “Cannibals Want Missionaries.” What is it that prompts thousands of people, young and those who are only young at heart, to serve on a short-term mission trip? Airports are flooded with church and school groups during Spring break making their way to serve two to three weeks. Fundraisers, T-shirts, and PowerPoint presentations depict groups of people going around the world to spend a few days working to build churches, hold medical clinics, and conduct evangelistic efforts.

What exactly do we mean when we say, “short-term?” The short-term mission trips that will be referred to in this discussion consist of two week to three month projects comprised primarily of high school and college students, mixed with a multi-generational staff of participants and sponsors. According to Milham, “some define short-term missions as any service cross-culturally for two weeks to two years or more” (1992:17). However, most of the short-term mission trips for high school and college students span from two weeks to three months (Tuttle 1998:10).

What can be done in two to three weeks? This is an important question critics of short-term missions have raised. There is a sense that short-term missions are effective, only for the participants and not necessarily for the ones being served. In fact, one retired missionary made the comment that short-term missions seemed like an oxymoron,
stating, “If it is short-term, it is probably not mission work.” Tuttle notes this at the outset of her research, inquiring, “Are summer missionaries really able to make a difference while serving such a short-time on the field?” (Tuttle 1998:6). The question is valid but the enduring impact of any act of service is hard to measure. So, even though some suggest the primary beneficiary of a short-term trip is the participant, there are qualities of this experience that are invaluable to church growth, individual transformation, and the enduring ownership of young people in the cause of Christ. It may be that short-term missions are the most effective activity in place to bind a younger generation to the mission of the Adventist movement. In truth, the fact that so many people want to go and serve does not convey a narcissistic tendency to go, give and come home, but an inherent hunger to contribute. The hunger among the saints to serve is growing.

**Growth**

When I graduated from college in 1992 the Seventh-day Adventist Church had about 7 million members across the globe after a hundred and fifty years of sharing the gospel. That number has doubled in the last fifteen years to 14 million. And those are only the ones the Church is allowed to count. In spite of all uncertainty about demographic trends and the problems of the plateauing church in the West, the global church is growing. When youth and young adults hear this information I can attest to the deep conviction and pride it brings to their hearts. For too long many have had to listen to counter-productive diatribes of what is wrong with Adventism. But the church is growing, and the more a younger generation can hear and see this reality the more workers there will be. If the church in North America today is dying then the words of Christ are even more pressing, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt 9:37, 38 NIV). What better way to assemble, train, and deploy more workers than through simulating the skills and activities of service that occur on a short-term mission trip.

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throughout the West, short-term missions are timely experiences that will foster more workers with a relevant disposition to the work of the gospel.

Transformation

The numerical growth or workers (missionaries) is fundamental, but the process of learning, or transformation, is an unmistakable reality of external growth. A college student returned from our short-term mission trip to Africa and asked, “Does God really need my service or does he need me to become a servant?” The answer is “yes—both.” His point was, God will reveal himself to people through people, but who we become as a result of our service is more important than the bricks we stacked or the sermons we delivered. More than any other method I know, as a teacher, pastor, and parent, service educates and changes young people in ways no formal education can. Consider Ellen White’s emphasis on service stated in the book Education:

True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a prepa-

service is the stated goal of Seventh-day Adventist education. I’m asserting that service is the most effective method for transforming people into the image of Christ. The short-term mission experience becomes a season of change for the par-
ticipants, young and those only young at heart. Anderson describes the impact of service in his study of short-term missions in the University Presbyterian Church, noting that “these experiences are not meant to be ends in themselves, nor goals toward which we move as a church. Rather they are means to an end. They become a tool to facilitate individual discipleship, Christian community, and servant ministry in the world” (1987:141). Jesus says in Luke 6:40, “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is rightly trained will become like his teacher.” People are created to be transformed and changed by learning, and learning by serving embodies what I believe is THE tool for training workers.

Ownership

Many are concerned with the growing number of young people “leaving the church.” (Dudley 1997). One church leader asked me, “How do we target and reach millennials?” The question came from a sincere, but flawed reference point. The moment you try and “target” or “reach” millennials, you have lost them. Young adults recoil at the notion that they are being marketed and so the goal is to have a mission, a cause worth dying for. Many long to contribute and join a movement that is not an organization that markets. One high school senior threw down a gauntlet to me challenging: “Show me what your church is doing that you are willing to die for. I want whatever cause I give myself to, to count.”

Ownership occurs in the lives of people who contribute and shape the direction of the church. It may be that short-term mission is one area to begin deepening the ownership of an emerging generation of workers. Already, the young people who have served on short-term mission trip with me have expressed a desire not just to return, but to return for life. When people serve and add to the growth and well-being of others around the world they experience ownership.

Kathryn Tuttle studied the effects of summer mission experiences on Christian college students who attend college within the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of short-term mission service on college students’ spiritual growth and faith maturity (Tuttle 1998:183). When students were asked, “What aspects of their college experience most impacted them spiritually, 18 out of 20, or 90%, mentioned their short-term missions experience” (275). Ultimately their mission experience “ranked among the top five elements that promoted spiritual growth during their college experience” (275).

As I have surveyed the research of short-term mission trips and participated in many myself, it seems clear that orga-
nizations, churches, and schools believe the impact is real and valuable. Participants experience a renewed awareness and commitment to missions as well as a noticeable change in their relationship to God and others. The short-term mission experience, for many institutions, is a methodology for the enrichment of the participants as well as a response to the needs of the world.

I do believe that the short-term mission experience can be improved upon. The following are a few suggestions that may increase “Good Going.”

1. Plan trips that have a clear, achievable objective where everyone can significantly contribute. What tends to deaden the impact of service is when what is being done doesn’t seem to be helpful.

2. Make a unique offering. If you are going to spend thousands of dollars to go, do something that only you can do. In some cases, students and lay people travel the world at huge expense to build bench pews or lay brick and mortar that local people are perfectly capable of doing. Invite the team to be ready to tell their story of faith, pray or give a Bible study, visit or encourage local leaders and fellow workers. We need to train the participants to preach, teach, share, listen, pray, affirm, dignify, and value another culture, and ultimately pay attention to one person at a time. This builds a unique service.

3. Deepen the level of commitment and ownership by spending significant time preparing as a team. Invite each person to keep a prayer journal before they go. Ask the participants to answer and discuss a few questions in small groups such as: Why are you going? What do you hope to contribute?

4. William Carey, who is called the father of modern missions, said, “Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.” It is likely that the benefit of short-term mission experiences will have a lot to do with the level of expectations. At the end of each day’s work at the project, invite the group to debrief and reflect on what God is doing in their heart as well as the lives of people they are serving. The conversation will teach as well as deepen the earnest effort to do more the next day.

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How will you spiritually prepare for the trip?

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questions for further conversation about the state of missions as it relates to young people. Some questions to ask: How is the influx of short-term missions impacting people to serve as career missionaries? In the last ten years, how many of the full-time/term missionaries were student missionaries (college students who served for a year)? How many student missionaries (college students who served for a year) participated in a short-term mission trip?

Going is important for several reasons. “Good Going” seems to expand the number of workers who are sharing the gospel of Christ. “Good Going” is a learning experience that transforms individuals in ways that local education simply cannot. “Good Going” increases the ownership in the mission of the church for those who participate.


Works Cited


