The Impact of Short-Term Missions at the Local Church Level

By Gary Wagner

Short-term missions is a major factor in the changing face of missions. The last three decades have seen reductions in the number of regular service missionaries serving the world field from the North American Division (NAD) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Lawrence 2005). The years 1979 to 2006, showed a drop in the number of these regular service missionaries from 796 to approximately 499 (General Conference Statistical Report 2006:5).

This decline had been surpassed by the growth of a new breed of missionaries known as short-term missionaries who serve from a few days to as long as two years. The numbers in this category have exploded from one in 1959 to approximately 70,000 in 2005 (Rojas 2006). The exact number is impossible to know because individuals, local church groups, and new start-up groups often do not report their activities to any recording organization. Across the board, the short-term missionary movement is considered to be one of the most powerful forces mobilizing new missionaries today (Penney 2001:304).

Missions have been around for longer than the church itself. It is the calling of the church at every level and in every place. It is found in the commission to the church (Matt 28:19, 20), commanding those who believe to go and make disciples. The purpose—to move people in the world to reveal the character of God and be ready to spend eternity with him—is not unlike the first command to Adam. In Gen 1:28, God said to our first parents, “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.” In both cases, the command was to fill the earth with people reflecting the image of God. In both cases, the mandate is given to all, including the descendants of the ones who first received it,

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and in both cases, the command given included the authority, the gifts, and the powers needed to accomplish the task.

Similarly, short-term missions have always been part of God’s plan. Famous short-term missionaries include Jonah, Peter, and Paul. Their names remind us of their missions to specific places to do specific tasks for short periods of time. This fact alone seems to destroy any theological argument against short-term missions.

There are other arguments against short-term missions, however. They range from a concern that post-modernism and its pluralism is infecting missions instead of missions overcoming and impacting culture (Penney 2001:314), that the money used to support short-term projects is a drain on the finances historically used for regular missions, and the view that the money used to send so many short-termers could be better used if just sent to the field to hire local workers (317). Some short-term trips have been a disaster for the volunteer, for the resident missionary in the field, and for the local population including the church and the community that was supposed to be served. So not all short-term missions result in positive outcomes.

With the number of church members traveling on mission trips, the amount of time, money, and effort being expended on them, and the potential impact for the good or harm of the work of God around the world, much research is needed. Some questions include, Do people who go on short-term mission trips become regular missionaries? Does going on a short-term trip draw a person closer to God? Will they give more money to missions?

Most short-termers are sent to their field of service by independent organizations such as Maranatha Volunteers International, conference-sponsored organizations such as Share Him, or local church organizations such as Berkshire Mission. The volunteers come from all age groups from as young as four to as old as ninety.

The impact of short-term mission trips on young adult participants has been documented recently in a Ph.D. dissertation (Fitzgerald 2004). However, since short-term missions is not solely the domain of young adults, is it necessary to understand...
the impact which this kind of cross-generational service has. This research was designed to facilitate the beginning of an understanding of the impact of short-term missions on those who go, from age eighteen and up. The academic rigors of research among children under eighteen precluded them from being included.

The Berkshire Mission group was selected because of this researcher’s involvement in organizing the group and traveling with them on most of their trips. Berkshire Mission is a locally based voluntary organization which seeks to “relieve the suffering of [humanity]” (Young 2006). It was organized in 1999 by Bob Young, a member of the Berkshire Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lee’sboro, Massachusetts. Under Mr. Young’s direction, the group has traveled to Central and South America six times to conduct programs to assist the people and churches in several countries. The work of the group included construction, medical, dental, optometry, evangelism, educational industry, and community services.

No testing was done at the Berkshire Hills Church to determine attitudes of the members before mission trips began in 1999, however, it is possible to evaluate the impact on those who go on the trips. Factors impacting participants were evaluated using a survey to determine how people were affected and to make suggestions on improving the impact of future short-term mission trips.

After traveling on a short-term mission trip, participants from the Berkshire Mission group were asked to voluntarily complete a survey comprised of questions which sought to qualify each person’s view of their experience and opinion before, during, and after the mission trip. Eighty-five surveys were mailed with 53 (or 62 percent) returned. One survey form could not be counted in the data, as the person failed to give permission for their responses to be used.

Of the total useable responses, 94 percent were 25 years old or older, allowing this study to show the impact on a general population as opposed to a group of students only. Ninety-six
percent of the respondents had taken from 1 to 10 mission trips, with a majority—51 percent having been on from 2 to 5 trips. The survey sought to answer the question, Do mission trips make a difference in the lives of the participants?

Seventy-two percent said that before going on a mission trip, they had not been interested in becoming a regular missionary. That is, they either strongly disagreed, disagreed, or were neutral about an interest in being a regular missionary. Only 21 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they had such interest. After the trip, 38 percent (4 additional people) expressed interest or strong interest in becoming regular missionaries.

Whether this actually translates into people becoming regular missionaries is impossible at present to determine in an Adventist setting. No study has been done by the Adventist Church to determine whether newly appointed regular missionaries ever served as short-term missionaries and might have been influenced by that service to become regular missionaries.

The specific areas studied for the impact of short-term missions on the participants, and the percentages of those who responded Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA) are shown in Table 1.

Many of these responses are self-explanatory. In some areas there were perceived changes but it is unclear if there is real change. This study is also too limited in its scope to determine whether the perceived changes continued for any length of time. Improved prayer life, feeling better about oneself, and feeling closer to God can all be short-lived changes. To experience real change, a person must become involved in ongoing service of some sort. Since time and money would

Table 1. Areas short-term mission impacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. I found I had talents I wasn’t aware of</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. I feel better about myself</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. I feel closer to God</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. I feel a new commitment to serving others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. I find that my prayer life is stronger</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. I have a better understanding of cultural differences</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. I plan to go on more short-term mission trips</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. I plan to be more involved in mission outreach at home</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. I will give more money to mission projects</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. I would like to be a regular missionary</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
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be a factor preventing most people from continually going on short-term mission trips to maintain these elevated perceptions, local service opportunities should be found to maintain involvement.

This area of personal involvement may indicate a more accurate picture of the impact of mission trips. Sixty-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that they plan to be more involved in mission outreach at home. If it happens, this has the potential for lasting real life change. While 63 percent said they planned to be more involved at home 85 percent planned on going on additional overseas missions. Still, if 63 percent of the 70,000+ each year who go on short-term mission trips become involved in local mission outreach, this would mean a massive impact on the work of the churches in their communities. This should be explored.

Another area where this impact would be greatly felt is in the responses to the question, “I will give more money for mission projects.” Fifty-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that they plan to give more. This could be happening. The statistical report for 2006 from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (table 2) shows stagnant or declining levels of giving to the Sabbath School Mission Offering from 1997 to 2003. Levels of giving then began an appreciable three-year increase (General Conference Statistical Report 2006:87). What is not known is the reason for the decrease nor for this increase. There does not seem to be a process to evaluate cause and effect for these fluctuations.

Possibly a more telling figure is the per capita giving for missions. Since 1975, it has been in a free fall from $20.79 to $3.85 in 2004. This figure increased to $3.98 in 2005 and to $4.16 in 2006. The General Conference under-treasurer (Rose 2006) does not know if there is a relationship between mission offering giving and the increases in the number of short-term missionaries.

This giving to the church does not include the donations to other mission groups such as Berkshire Mission and Maranatha Volunteers International. Revenue for Maranatha in 2005 totaled just over $15 million (Charity Navigator 2007). This may not be a totally accurate figure, but in general, the percentage of Maranatha’s annual revenue which comes from people who have been on their short-term mission trips is

Table 2. Sabbath School Mission Offerings (In $ Millions)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>47.14</td>
<td>45.65</td>
<td>44.74</td>
<td>44.39</td>
<td>44.99</td>
<td>44.60</td>
<td>44.55</td>
<td>44.13</td>
<td>45.60</td>
<td>49.43</td>
<td>53.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in the 90 percent range (Weiss 2007). Add to this the $1,000 to $2,000 which each of the 2,500 to 3,000 people who go each year with Maranatha spend on their own trips and there is four to five million dollars more. If each of the 70,000 volunteers spend just $500 for travel this is an additional 35 million dollars. Mission giving is definitely on the rise.

Some of the responses can be compared by the goers’ perceptions before the trip and after. Before the Berkshire Mission trip, a desire to serve others was an unanimous factor for those they were going with a desire to experience a different culture listed their first reason as a desire to serve others, and the second reason was being called by God to go. After the trip, this person strongly agreed that they had a better understanding of cultural differences. The impact came in an area where there was no stated interest. Likewise, the two people who disagreed that they had received a better understanding of cultural differences had both responded that they agreed that they were going with a desire to experience a different culture.

Seventy-nine percent agreed or strongly agreed that adventure played a role for them to go on the mission trip.

who went. Afterwards, 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed that this factor was increased for them. They had a new commitment to serve others.

The desire to experience a different culture was a factor for 90 percent of the respondents. Eighty-six percent subsequently felt that they had received a better understanding of cultural differences by having gone on the trip.

These last two categories may be used to show that people find whatever they are looking for. This cannot be disproved. However, anecdotally, the one person who before going disagreed that

Except for these isolated examples, one might determine that if people with the right motives go on a short-term mission trip, then the trip will be successful and have a positive impact. However, this conclusion might be contradicted by the results of another question.

One of the objections to short-term missions is that many people make their decision to go based primarily on a desire for adventure. The inference is that these people may not be going for appropriate reasons, and may either create some negative impact for the trip, or not be positively impact-
ed themselves. Seventy-nine percent of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that adventure played a role for them to go on the mission trip.

The results imply that when it comes to adventure, a person can be positively impacted to nearly the same degree as can any other person who goes with any other level of interest in adventure. The desire to go on a mission trip for the sake of adventure should not be used as a reason to keep a person from going.

Interestingly, a person who disagrees that they are going for adventure is significantly less likely after the trip to find that their prayer life is stronger or to be more interested in mission outreach at home after returning than the persons who admitted that they were interested in adventure. Those not interested in adventure seem not to benefit as much as others in some areas that are desirable to short-term mission promoters.

The same basic summary can be given in a declaration of those having gone in response to God’s call to go. People who disagreed that they were going in response to the call of God were less likely to sense a stronger prayer life and less likely to become involved in mission outreach at home than those giving more favorable responses to this item.

Since there was an opportunity to evaluate different age groups, table 3 shows each category (A-J as in table 1) and the Response Average for each age group. The Response Average (RA) is based on a number value given to each possible response (Strongly Disagree = 1.00, Disagree = 2.00, Neutral = 3.00, Agree = 4.00, Strongly Agree = 5.00). The higher the RA, the larger number of respondents in that category who answered

Table 3. Response Average for Each Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>18-24</th>
<th>25-35</th>
<th>36-50</th>
<th>51-65</th>
<th>65+</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strongly Agree. A score higher than 3.00 represents a positive impact on the people in that age group for that category.

It is clear that people in every age group are (or can be) positively impacted by going on a short-term mission trip. The exception seems to be that even going on a mission trip does not seem to lead a large percentage of people to want to become regular missionaries. Only 38 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were interested after the trip to consider being a regular missionary. If this figure was consistent among the 70,000 participants each year, there could be 26,600 new missionaries available. This will continue to be a resource which should not remain untapped. There is worldwide demand for more regular missionaries, but the requests are unfunded (Bediako 2006). Returned short-term missionaries are a major force which should be enlisted in some type of ministry.

Summary
The impact of short-term missions on the general population is very positive when under-

taken by leadership such as Mr. Bob Young and Berkshire Mission. Anecdotes from other ill-fated trips suggest that strong, visionary Christian leadership providing proper planning and organization combine to facilitate positive results.

People of all ages should be welcomed and encouraged to participate in short-term mission trips. The potential benefit of having all ages represented on a trip include the impact on the participants themselves, the benefit of the project, and future considerations such as long-lived volunteer service and funding for missions and evangelism.

The church leadership should be cautious not to over-regulate short-term missions. Lay people are doing a great job.

Recommendations
Short-term mission trips will probably be around for quite some time. The Adventist Church should encourage all conferences, local churches, and other organizations that send teams on short-term mission trips to survey their teams before and after each trip. The survey would determine what the impact is on those who go, those who send them, those they go to serve, and those in the communities where they go. Such a survey would help
to make a distinction between those groups or leaders whose trips are actually beneficial to the church and those who lead trips with a counterproductive impact. The church leadership should be cautious not to over-regulate short-term missions. Lay people are doing a great job. Leave it in their hands, but help them do it better.

Training should be established to teach group leaders how to lead effective mission trips. Maranatha Volunteers International is now requiring leaders of trips to be trained in order to make the trips better. This is a positive step.

A ministry track should be developed for those who are interested in being regular missionaries, but for whom there is no funding to send them. Lay people should be encouraged who are adept at leading beneficial mission trips to develop ministries to organize and lead trips for other local churches and groups. A self-supporting leadership team could conduct twenty trips a year consisting of people from many different places. By focusing on a particular area such as a school, hospital, or group of churches in a single country, major projects can be accomplished which will fit in with the objectives of the church. This would be different than Maranatha in that the leadership team would assist in the development of the project and go with the team to carry it out. It could still be done in conjunction with Maranatha.

A ministry track should be developed for those who are interested in being regular missionaries, but for whom there is no funding to send them. This could be a tentmaker style program that would provide volunteers over the long term to do things from being a Bible worker in a city to building facilities for churches or institutions.

Research is needed as to the advisability of taking non-Seventh-day Adventists or non-Christians on mission trips. This was done by Berkshire mission and questions concerning this practice were included in the survey, but the responses did not have statistical significance. It would be good to determine the impact on non-Adventists or non-Christians, the rest of the team, the host church, and the host church community when teams have such a make-up. Mixed teams may be a method of relationship building that should be encouraged. It could
be that those wishing to bring non-Seventh-day Adventists on mission trips should have some advance criteria to determine whether that person should or should not attend.

Another recommendation is to dialogue with Share Him to develop a method to package local evangelism to be more like a short-term mission project. Share Him’s domestic meetings have begun to move in this direction, but ways need to be found to facilitate and expand this while diminishing the amount of red tape. Lay people must be central in this type of program. Invitations to participate in Share Him evangelism could be sent to survey respondents who said they would like to be more involved in mission outreach at home, and those who would like to be regular missionaries.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church should make careful evaluation of their statistics on regular missions, short-term missions, missionaries, tithe, mission offerings, and Ingathering. These should be compared with world and regional trends to determine what is happening, why it is happening, and how to deal with what is happening to enable the church to become more effective in evangelism and mission outreach.

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