

Short Mission Trips

By Pastor Alan Utting



'Short-term missions are not about changing the world in two weeks; they're about letting God change you for the rest of your life.' Anonymous

Sending teams abroad is now common, though opinions on its effectiveness vary. Below is a summary of the pros and cons, along with practical tips for those considering sending teams. This is not a comprehensive article, but it does touch on significant points which I have found useful in my travels.

Advantages

1. The New Testament illustrates, particularly through Paul's ministry and others, how important it is to work as a team when sharing Christ across different cultures (see Acts 13 and onward).
2. Nationals never or seldom complain about the arrival of teams. The advantages for them are that they often get financial help for various projects, manpower to help complete projects and sometimes have ongoing contact with team members which they appreciate.
3. Team members get exposure into other cultures, living conditions and needs. These benefits are huge.
4. With a positive attitude intercultural visits offer valuable insight into other ways of life and strengthen Christian fellowship.
5. It may mean that team members upon returning home feel the call to become much more involved in missions either at home or overseas.
6. It can be an encouragement to the expat workers in another country to get a visit from people from their home country.
7. It can be a great encouragement for the local church at home in contributing to their involvement in mission like for example building a classroom.

Disadvantages

1. Travel expenses are often high and sending the funds overseas instead of spending them on travel could be beneficial, though this is unlikely to happen.
2. A visiting team can be a drain on the missionary's time and energy level as their routines are affected.
3. Team members don't always cope well with culture shock and can be a liability.
4. People coming home sometimes demonstrate an attitude of pride and self-importance.
5. Some of the returning team members could find it hard to resettle into their old routines.

If you decide on a mission trip, consider the following:

Preparation for the trip

1. Good advice that I received from one professor was if you regularly take teams overseas generally go to one group of people to build an ongoing relationship.

2. Select the right country and location and job project where your input will be well received.
3. Have several team meetings well before departure for preparation and significant prayer times. Work out clearly the objectives of the planned trip.
4. Emphasise the fact that this is not a holiday and that every team member is accountable to the team leader.
5. In fundraising, encourage team members to participate actively and to trust the Lord to provide for their financial needs. This may sometimes mean taking on additional work to meet expenses. Stepping out in faith is an important part of the learning journey. Only in exceptional circumstances should a person's fare be fully covered.
6. Select the right people for the team. People with a servant heart, very open to learning and sensitive to needs.
7. Team members need to be in good health and check on the need for vaccinations, and medication requirements. Young people need their parent's permission.
8. Check whether you need a visa or not for your visit.
9. Pre visit training: topics which need to be covered are the objectives of the trip, gaining some understanding of cultural values, photography, programmes, importance of empathy with nationals, culture shock, devotional times together, team bonding, gain insight as to how to share your faith, understanding basic vocabulary learnt will help build relationships, team members must not give gifts without the leader's consent etc.
10. Upon arrival when working on projects endeavour to include nationals. This gets away from a hand-out mentality which creates dependency. As much as possible be aware of the skill set they offer.

Upon arrival home

1. Before arriving home, remind them that some people will be very interested in your mission's trip while most will not after a short period of time. Be grateful for experiences and knowledge gained and don't act as an expert. It takes years to understand another culture and even then, due to our background we don't fully understand it. Remind the team also that they could feel unsettled for a while as they adjust to their normal routines and consider their place in God's wider purpose for their life. They need to be kind to themselves if re-entry is a stress.
2. Sometime during the next two weeks of re entry have a good debriefing session where you talk about your experiences. Spend time in prayer. There are good articles on the internet providing topics to cover. Below are some questions:

What were your highlights?
 What areas did you most struggle in?
 Were the objectives achieved?
 How well do you think you connected with the people?
 What were the most valuable learning experiences for you?
 If you did another trip, what would you do differently?
 How is God prompting you to become involved in missions?

Resources

Peter Jordan, *Re-Entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home*