



Mission Trips: Attend to the Planning and the Purpose

BRIAN BALLARD

Participation in global short-term mission (STM) trips has become a booming phenomenon. As a pastor overseeing various partnerships in mission and ministry, I began wondering if the staggering hours and dollars invested in these short-term trips were bearing fruit? Will these STM experiences stand as merely a fond memory or can we expect to see long-term impact from having participated in these trips?

Research and experience have revealed that there are at least two distinct paradigms for engaging global STM trips. Within each paradigm, global STM participants can and often do experience a blended variety of relational and work-based activities. The paradigm, however, shapes why and how participants engage in these activities.

The first paradigm is the predominant approach, one that unilaterally provides for those who themselves lack means and who depend on the generosity of a benefactor. This benefactor often travels great distances to briefly provide assistance in well-intended or even heroic ways. The focus within the benefactor approach tends toward building and fixing things. It appeals to those who want to help and serve the poor without long-term disruption to their own lives. As a society, we are typically happy to participate in STM experiences as long as we do not have to walk with the recipients where they walk (except briefly); that is, as long as we can essentially minister to them from our safe enclosures.

Coordinators serve a critical role in fostering long-term impact for participants in these short-term trips. Far beyond attending to travel logistics, the STM coordinator functions as a spiritual guide. They facilitate an ongoing process of reflection that can lead to long-term impact. They help global STM participants attend to their experience in light of God's life-shaping presence. Significant reflection before, during, and after a global STM experience does not just happen. The reflective process requires leadership. Thus, coordinators need to be knowledgeable practitioners in guiding reflective processes.

A critical dimension of guiding a fruitful reflective conversation relates to the timing of provocative questions. While these reflective opportunities can arise quite unexpectedly during an STM, specific time should be set aside for communal reflection. We now know that the majority of STM teams are particularly deficient

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Mission Trips: Participate in the Family Reunion

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A dozen people had gathered at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Minneapolis. It was late 2010, and we were planning a trip to Ethiopia in early 2011. We were learning about the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), about Ethiopia, and about the church institutions in Aira, the small town in far western Ethiopia where most of our companion relationships are focused. One of the future travelers asked, “But what are we going to *do* while we’re there?” The answer: “We’re going to be the church, together.”

And indeed, that is what happened during those weeks as we met church leaders and officials in Addis Ababa, but more so as we spent a full week in Aira with the staff and patients at the church-owned Aira Hospital, with the faculty and students of EECMY’s Onesimus Nesib Seminary, and with our brothers and sisters at Lalo Aira, Good Shepherd’s companion congregation.

First, we listened to their stories of the mighty acts of God in their lives. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*, “The *first* service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them.”¹ And that was only the beginning.

We witnessed the Spirit’s power in their worship and felt their hands blessing us. We heard their passionate preaching and their earnest teaching. We observed their loving care of the ill and the injured in the hospital—truly the hands of Christ in western Ethiopia. We marveled at their hopeful stewardship of the environment. We wept with them as they spoke of the all-consuming life needs of so many with whom they minister. We joined together in song, an exuberant exclamation of faith that danced through us. We knelt together in prayer and were shaken by the power of their utterances, the urgency of their petitions, and the confidence of their asking. We walked with them down dirt streets and explored country paths where the church is changing lives. We reveled in the community that gathered everywhere around us. And they embraced us, eager to hear about our congregation’s ministries, our people’s faith, our witness in a culture so different from their own. The learning, the compassion flowed both ways. In short, we were the church, together—the communion of saints.

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperOne, 1990) 338. Italics in original.

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in post-trip reflective processes, and yet this time as a team is critical for long-term impact.

Global STM experiences conducted in this way have actually made a difference in the broader life and ministry of the congregation I lead. These trips take participants out of their habitual environments, comfort zones, and the structures of everyday life. The experiences open participants to consider new ways of living in the world. Following the global STM experience, participants often reveal a stronger sense of connectedness to their home congregations. Upon returning, participants regularly engage in existing ministries with renewed fervor or help develop new ministries. As participants return from these life-shaping experiences, their presence serves to strengthen the congregation's culture of local and global outreach.

This brings us to a second, more promising paradigm for STM experiences. In contrast to the first, this paradigm seeks bilateral reciprocity in which each participant is interdependently both giver and receiver. Doing things like building or fixing things might also happen on a particular trip, but those projects are always secondary to the building of relationships. Within a paradigm of accompaniment, participants engage these relationships with humble mutuality.

There is biblical precedence for this paradigm, revealed in a simple and yet profound word in the Greek New Testament: *allēlōn* (“one another”). This is a key concept of life together in the Spirit-led fellowship of Jesus' followers. It conveys interdependence and mutuality. For example, through the life-shaping accompaniment of God by the power of the Spirit, Peter experienced a new perspective that enabled him to step beyond the boundaries of conventional limitations (see Acts 10). Peter's changed perspective regarding widening the circle of mission to the Gentiles occurred as he engaged the concrete relational opportunity of walking with Cornelius and his household. Led by the Spirit, Peter visited with Cornelius and ate with his household. Peter embodied God's missional reach beyond the sectarian tribalism of a particular people. God was mercifully widening the circle beyond the conventional religious rules and cultural boundaries driven by the purity code. God was shattering the thick walls of these exclusionary practices. This is what can happen for participants in STM experiences as well.

God in Jesus invites followers to see with new eyes the ancient vision of life with God in the neighborhood. Walking in the joyous wonder of God's life-shaping presence of grace, STM participants—both those who journey and those who receive them—might embody God's mission of reconciling embrace. Well-designed and led STM experiences are invaluable for living into God's vision of intercultural solidarity and the restoration of life among all people throughout the world. ⊕

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As I stood in front of the worshiping assembly at Lalo Aira on Sunday—an area so large that it included a lean-to outside their considerable church building offering seats to nearly as many as gathered inside, while still others leaned through open windows, eager to hear the gospel—I was struck by the baptismal covenant that binds us together though our life experiences are so different. We are one body in Christ! We are God’s children—brothers and sisters, family. We know we will not go to Aira on a mission trip to build (day laborers there need every hour of work available to them) or to lecture about our faith practices (we have so much to learn from them). We are eager to go back to Aira so we can be together with God’s people there—a family reunion!

Aira is two days drive from Addis Ababa, far removed from the transportation, communication, and cultural thoroughfares of the world. When a group from Good Shepherd visited in 2007, a synod staff member from Aira greeted them by saying, “It’s good you are here. Now we know we are not alone.” Indeed, not alone! Good Shepherd and Lalo Aira are bound together in the Spirit of Christ. And each time we are together, that relationship is enriched.

Now we wait patiently and prayerfully after hearing of the EECMY’s decision to sever relationship with the ELCA, to learn what this means for our partnerships with God’s people in Aira. From our perspective, we are family in Christ, bound together whatever the difficulties. As Bonhoeffer notes, “The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is alive between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we really do *have* one another. We have one another completely and for all eternity.”² ⊕

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²*ibid.*, 326.