

TRIPPING ON STM:
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO
PRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION OF SHORT-TERM MISSION

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INTRODUCTION

At a conference of the International Federation of Evangelical Students in Flanders, the Danish keynote speaker Karin Ramachandra addressed the issue of short-term mission trips (from here on: STM trips). She accused the European people of silencing its conscience on poverty issues by ways of STM trips. These trips actually do more harm to the locals than they do good, she stated. The sole beneficiary of such a trip is the European.¹ The audience was to say the least aroused and provoked, and some students were even furious at Ramachandra for her statement. What followed was a heated discussion.

From this discussion several research questions can be derived. In this paper the focus lays on the following: How are STMs regarded by short-term missionaries, and how are they perceived by the local hosts? Is there a difference? How can this be explained? To answer these questions, first a definition of STM and an overview of its range are given. Second, the different views on STMs are examined. Finally, some possible explanations are given, including some suggestions for further research.

¹ Karin is married to Vinoth Ramanchandra and they both work for the International Federation of Evangelical Students (IFES). They live in Sri Lanka, and have done so for over ten years. Thus, Karin has a good view on both the European and the Sri Lankan culture.

ONE

SHORT-TERM MISSION

Definition

The concept of STM consists of two parts: an indication of time (“short-term”), and an indication of intent (“mission”). On the period of time, definitions vary. It stretches from a few days to two years.²

It is remarkable that the second part of STM, namely “mission”, is too rarely elaborated on in the STM-context. One of the approaches is that of Marcos Arroyo Bahamonde. He suggests that European and US American mission has been oriented too much toward making “converts” instead of “disciples”, contrary to the Great Commission.³ This commission demands a that mission affects “the entire society and its socio-cultural environment.”⁴ There are of course other approaches toward mission possible, but in this paper this description by a “local” scholar is used.

While one could elaborate on the indication of time, the biggest point of discussion here is the nature of the STM trips: could they be called mission? Brian M. Howell makes a strong case that the “missionary view” of STMs and the “tourist gaze” in the anthropology of tourism are alike:

For the short-term missionary, as for the tourist, ability to perceive the experience of travel outside the preformed grooves of the gaze becomes

² E.g. Robert J. Priest et al., “Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement,” *Missiology* 34, no. 4 (2006): 431.

³ Marcos Arroyo Bahamonde, “Contextualization of Mission: A Missiological Analysis of Short-Term Missions,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2, no. 2 (2007): 232.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

difficult at best. The result for the tourist may be a lamentable but ultimately innocuous blandness in which real human connection is lost in favor of an 'experience.' For Christian missionaries, whose goals both religious and humanitarian depend on the *host country inhabitants' perception of their actions*, lack of connection would certainly pose significant problems.⁵

Miguel Ángel Palomino thus prefers not to speak of 'mission' because of the fact that STM resembles much more tourism than it does career mission.⁶ The incarnational part of mission is missing and STM could better be called "religious tourism" or "Summer Camp", especially since the objectives often do not relate to evangelism and discipleship.⁷ The focus in STMs lays too much on "doing rather than being."⁸ Mission is more than just a one or two week trip. It is a year-round incarnational involvement.

Range

A 2005 US survey with more than 2,300 active visiting church members over all denominations, including Roman Catholics, showed that 2.1% had gone on an STM trip in the past year. This figure rose to 3.6% when the population was limited to teenagers.⁹ Recent estimates of Americans going on STMs vary from one to four

⁵ Brian M. Howell, "Mission to Nowhere: Putting Short-Term Missions into Context," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33, no. 4 (2009): 207, italics mine.

⁶ Miguel Ángel Palomino, "'If Everything Is Mission, Nothing Is Mission': Reflections on Short-Term Missions," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2, no. 2 (2007): 217.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁸ Bo Cassell, "The Dirty Little Secret about Mission Trips," YouthMinistry.com, <http://www.youthministry.com/?q=node/5412> (accessed December 4, 2009).

⁹ Priest et al., "Researching Short-Term Mission," 432; Robert J. Priest, and Joseph Paul Priest, "'They See Everything, and Understand Nothing': Short-Term Mission and Service Learning," *Missiology* 36, no. 1 (2008): 54.

million each year.¹⁰ Research among 407 students of General Education in four US Christian Colleges indicated that 59% of them had been abroad on STM.¹¹ This is a huge increase in comparison with estimates from 1992 where was expected that 250 thousand Christians in the United States and Canada went on STM.¹²

So far, there has been little research on the evolution of STM and the reason for its growth. One study tries to do this for the US personnel of 690 Protestant Mission Agencies. The definition of STM was “overseas from two weeks to one year.” Long-term mission was “overseas for more than four years.”¹³ The results in the table show an exponential growth at the turn of the century and this does not even include STMs

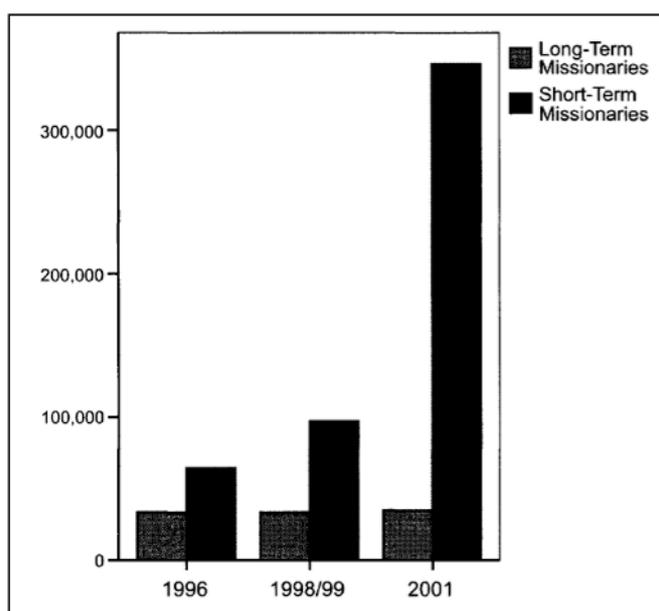


Figure 0: U.S. Personnel for 690 Protestant Mission Agencies

¹⁰ Robert J. Priest, “Introduction: Short-Term Missions and the Latin American Church,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2, no. 2 (2007): 9; Eliseo Vélchez-Blancas, “Short-Term Missions: A Sign of Mutations, Tensions, and Challenges in Mission,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2, no. 2 (2007): 160; Jenny Trinitapoli and Stephen Vaisey, “The Transformative Role of Religious Experience: The Case of Short-Term Missions,” *Social Forces* 88, no. 1 (2009): 122; Palomino, “Reflections on Short-Term Missions,” 209.

¹¹ Priest et al., “Researching Short-Term Mission,” 439.

¹² Roger Peterson in: L. Blair Clark, “Separating the Wheat and the Chaff: Evaluating Short-Term Mission Opportunities,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1993): 384.

¹³ Priest, et al. “Researching Short-Term Mission,” 431.

shorter than two weeks and missions of Catholic organizations or apart from formal Protestant mission organizations.¹⁴

Some remarks need to be made. There is no mentioning of the personnel, overseas for one to four years. This raises the question whether the difference would decrease if mid-long term missions were included. Further, the definition of STM is focussed on the period and not what is intended by “mission”. This seems to suggest that the only difference is the period and not the content. Is it possible to merely compare STM and career mission? Or is there a too big conceptual difference?

The question is whether it is possible to apply these US American figures to the Western European context. There are indications that this is a Western growth, and not a mere North American one.¹⁵ Even in Flanders several churches, youth groups and para-churchal organization—such as GO!-teams¹⁶ and OMF¹⁷—organize STM trips for young people. But still the extent of STMs in Western Europe and more specific in Flanders asks for a more thorough research. This however goes beyond the range of this paper. In the next paragraph use the websites of GO! and OMF as a case.

¹⁴ Ibid., 432.

¹⁵ See Arroyo Bahamonde, “Contextualization of Mission,” 227, 241; Rodrigo Maslucán, “Short-Term Missions: Analysis and Proposals,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2, no. 2 (2007): 139; Palomino, “Reflections on Short-Term Missions,” 210.

¹⁶ The website of the GO!-teams suggest doing so since 1999. “GO!-teams Vlaanderen,” <http://www.goteamsvlaanderen.be/> (accessed January 5, 2010).

¹⁷ OMF, “Short Term,” <http://www.omf.be/short%20term.htm> (accessed January 5, 2010).

TWO

EXPECTATIONS

Presentation

How do they that go on an STM trip and those who support it regard these trips? The fact that they are commonly called STM trips, suggests that they are viewed as mission. But what are the factual goals of these STMs? Terrence D. Linhart did qualitative research among ten of the students in his seminary he took on a mission trip. Based on several interviews and reactions during the eight month preparation and trip he found that in fact,

one of the purposes of this trip was to instill a passion in the lives of the students. They saw in their hosts a way of life, and fervor for God, which seemed more authentic, more “alive” than what they had known.¹⁸

This is of course a small scale research set-up and one could question whether this is a general goal of STMs. Further, one could make a difference between the representation of the goals and the actual achievement of the STMs. Not much has been researched on a possible discrepancy between those two.

In our case, both the more self-oriented (religious experience) and the other-oriented (evangelistic and humanitarian support) are presented as goals. This is visible in the representation of the mission trips by the GO!-teams and OMF Belgium. GO!-teams' homepage states: “Reaching people ... encouraging missionaries ... and

¹⁸ Terrence D. Linhart, “They Were So Alive! The Spectacle Self and Youth Group Short-Term Mission Trips,” *Missiology* 34, no. 4 (2006), 453.

probably returning with new vision.”¹⁹ The OMF project ‘Serve Taiwan’—a two-week mission trip in cooperation with the Evangelical Youth Union—has as goals: “tasting a little of the Asian culture, supporting missionaries, sharing the Gospel and discovering God’s plan for your life.”²⁰ Clearly, both organizations claim to have two goals: enriching the life of the STM visitors, and supporting local churches and missionaries. But how is this experienced by the latter?

Perception

Hunter Farrell researched the reception of STMs in a dialogue between some US American congregations, and some Peruvian churches and Christian NGOs working in Peru.²¹ The finding of the qualitative research was that the local churches and NGOs did not find the use of the STMs very cost-effective.²² He found that STMs were mostly perceived as self-oriented and often characterized by “fleeting, short-term interest”; “a focus on ‘doing a project’ rather than developing relationships” with the locals; “STM group initiative and control of STM project” (as opposed to local control); “little follow-up”, and “scant evidence of the ‘personal transformation’” that justifies an STM.²³

¹⁹ “GO!-teams Vlaanderen,” <http://www.goteamsvlaanderen.be/> (accessed January 9, 2010), my translation.

²⁰ OMF, “Serve Taiwan,” <http://www.omf.be/serveTaiwan.htm> (accessed January 9, 2010), my translation

²¹ Hunter Farrell, “Short-Term Missions: Paratrooper Incursion or ‘Zaccheus encounter’?” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2, no. 2 (2007): 72.

²² *Ibid.*, 72-3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73.

Farell adds that many local churches and NGOs do not understand the cut in their financial support with which they can do much more than the STMs, while the money invested in STMs seemingly increases.²⁴ Rodrigo Maslucán asks: “Missionary groups to paint walls, plant grass, and so on? Could these jobs not be carried out by local church members? Does it make sense to invest so much on these and similar jobs?”²⁵

Next, STMs inflict a great amount of extra care on the local hosts: they provide “guides, translators, food, places to stay, and often the activities that validate the missionaries’ presence.”²⁶ This is often experienced as a burden.

Further, based on their own experience in connecting with a foreign culture, career missionaries state that “short-term projects cannot achieve something of larger transcendence in a few days or weeks without a profound prior knowledge of the culture and native language and without the necessary time to build relationships with the people.”²⁷ The question is whether this can be achievement in merely preparing a trip. Despite of the eight month preparation of the trip Linhart’s research found that the students were so oriented toward their own experience that they only “saw” the locals that were enthusiastic in receiving them:

All of the students on this trip, except one, seemed unaware of the myriad of people who passed each day who seemed uninterested in the group, or portrayed facial expressions that were quite different from those who served as

²⁴ Ibid., 72-3.

²⁵ Maslucán, “Short-Term Missions,” 146.

²⁶ Edwin Zehner, “Short-Term Missions: Toward a More Field-Oriented Model,” *Missiology* 34, no. 4 (2006): 509.

²⁷ Arroyo Bahamonde, “Contextualization of Mission,” 233.

the hosts of the group, not exhibiting the “they were so happy” expressions of their gracious hosts.²⁸

When I was on a two and a half month STM in Burkina Faso a few years ago, the career missionaries I lived with had just hosted a GO!-team. The missionaries were disappointed in the group because of their lack of interest in the local community. When asked what they liked most about the country, the STM visitors responded “Village Artisanale”—a tourist oriented exhibition of local crafts—and the “Supermarché”—one of the few more Western shops in Ouagadougou. It is of course difficult to evaluate the missionaries’ feelings, but the several similar examples suggest at least a certain disinterest in cross-cultural experience with some of the visitors. Small sample research projects support that both career missionaries and local hosts experience this.²⁹ It should be added that there has been far too little research for the viewpoints of the local hosts.³⁰ Whether these results can be generalized, is to be questioned, although several consulted authors follow these statements.³¹

Although further research is definitely necessary, we dare say that the presentation of the STMs and their perception by hosts knows a discrepancy.

²⁸ Linhart, “They Were So Alive!” 455.

²⁹ Corrie L. Baar and David Livermore, both cited in: Zehner, “Short-Term Missions,” 510. They experienced a minor difference between locals and career missionaries. The former were milder toward STMs. Still this requires further research.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ E.g. Farrell, “Short-Term Missions,” 73; Maslucán, “Short-Term Missions,” 146.

THREE

CONCLUDING THEORETICAL APPROACHES

On the one hand STM is presented as supportive of career mission. On the other hand the hosts often perceive it as a burden, lacking culture sensitivity. How can this be explained and coped with based on a cultural anthropological approach?

Evolutionism

What might be an explanation for the negative reception of the career missionaries and locals, could be the more evolutionistic approach STMs seem to have.³² Like the students in Linhart's research, we suspect a lot of STM trippers experiencing people in "mission countries" as having a happier life.³³ This at first seems to be contradictory to the evolutionistic approach, because of its acknowledging Western materialism and happiness not necessarily correlating. However, we suggest that in regarding the "happier" life of the local as better, there is often implied we should "go back" to the simpler life. At the same time there is a premise of evolution (the Western world has a "richer" culture), and a statement that it used to be better. If this tendency—whether intended or not—is present, this could explain the negative approach toward STMs. To put it in extreme wordings, it is as if the STM trippers say: "Be happy with being poor, because being rich is a burden not easy to bear." In other words, the STM visitor makes the decision for the local.

³² Charles Taber, "The Missionary Movement and the Anthropologists," in *Bulletin of the Scottish Institute of Missionary Studies* 6-7 (1990-91), 19-20.

³³ See Linhart, "They Were So Alive!" 453.

And what does it communicate in evolutionistic terms to go abroad to paint, do carpentering, and play with children? Could this suggest the natives are depended on Western expertise? And if so, how will this suggestion be received by locals?

This can be regarded in etic/emic terms.³⁴ The STM tripper brings his own insights of Western materialism to the stage and makes a statement about the happiness. This outsider viewpoint not necessarily brings into account the proper experience of the local—the insider point. This can lead to a misunderstanding between the two parties. Further, the local often does not have an insider view on Western culture.³⁵ These insider/outsider approaches need to be translated into an etic/emic theory. There is need for a more in depth theory on the subjective experience—an emic theory—but also for an etic theory that tries to bridge the gaps between those two.³⁶

Of course, these theses require further research. Linhart and others found an appreciation of the locals' happier life, but more research needs to be done on what exactly attracts them and how they put it into words. Further, it must be examined how their hosts appreciate these approaches of their lives.

³⁴ See Marvin Harris, "Chapter 2: Etics and Emics," in *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times* (Oxford: AltaMira, 1999), 31-48.

³⁵ One could ask whether this also goes for the career missionary, being somewhat between the two worlds and maybe having lost a Western insider view.

³⁶ Harris, "Etics and Emics," 35, 45-47.

Functionalism

Probably even more important, is a functionalistic approach.³⁷ It seems that many authors writing on STM presuppose the role it plays in the lives and cultures of both the visitors and the hosts, while in fact there is little research done on this. STM still needs further exploration; especially as far as its goals are concerned and the consequent function it has in both the Western faith community and the “native” one. In the case of the ten students of Linhart, the functions were mainly self-oriented: “For the ten students participating on the trip, the cross-cultural mission trip created a setting that confronted how their culture and their histories had affected their identities.”³⁸

In similar wordings, Jenny Trinitapoli and Stephen Vaisey state that “though missiology as a field of study has focused on the impact of missions on the missionized, . . . the mission experience is often most salient for the missionary himself or herself.”³⁹ Maslucán notices the remarkable aspect of STMs that it is not as much the local population, but the missionaries themselves that have been “evangelized.”⁴⁰

Instead of making these statements about the nature of STMs without proper support, there is need for research-based theory on this. In doing this, a discrepancy between the realized perception of its nature by hosts and that by visitors needs to be made. So we suggest it is not enough to merely describe the function of STMs for

³⁷ See Taber, “Missionary Movement and Anthropologists,” 23-4.

³⁸ Linhart, “They Were So Alive!” 459.

³⁹ Trinitapoli and Vaisey, “Transformative Role of Religious Experience,” 123.

⁴⁰ Maslucán, “Short-Term Missions,” 144.

both hosts and visitors. It is necessary to examine the perception and the reception of that function in order to bridge the gap between visitor-oriented and host-oriented functionality and understanding.

Several consequences are possible. Maybe the research will show that “mission” is actually a misleading term and that the goals of STMs are of an entirely different nature. In that case the term STM maybe should become STV (Short-Term Visit) or STS (Short Term Service). Further, it is possible that the missionary goals proposed by the STMs differ from the goals expected by the locals and career missionaries. In that case an etic theory on STM, combining both emic viewpoints, is necessary.

The field of STM is relatively new and much needs to be done in the missiological and cultural anthropological field. We agree with Robert J. Priest “we need to revise and clarify our goals, submit our claims to a process of research and testing, and devise the right sorts of research to help modify our ministry practices in God-honoring ways.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Priest et al., “Researching Short-Term Mission,” 445.

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