

When the Elephant Dances, the Mouse May Die  
**The Dangers of Short-Term Missions**  
By Miriam Adeney

**L**et me tell you a story about Americans,” an African Christian friend said to me. Elephant and Mouse were best friends. One day Elephant said, “Mouse, let’s have a party!” Animals gathered from far and near. They ate. They drank. They sang. And they danced. And nobody celebrated more and danced harder than Elephant. After the party was over, Elephant exclaimed, “Mouse, did you ever go to a better party? What a blast!” But Mouse did not answer. “Mouse, where are you?” Elephant called. He looked around for his friend, and then shrank back in horror. There at Elephant’s feet lay Mouse. His little body was ground into the dirt. He had been smashed by the big feet of his exuberant friend, Elephant. “Sometimes, that is what it is like to do mission with you Americans,” the African storyteller commented. “It is like dancing with an Elephant

**We can hurt people through missions**  
The heartbeat of Christian living is in mission. The love of Christ propels us out of our comfort zones. Blessed spiritually and materially, we Americans owe a debt to the world. So we go out in mission. As we go, we bring our strengths. An efficient, pragmatic, problem solving can-do-attitude. An egalitarianism. A vitality. Significant resources of all kinds. Yet we can hurt the people we go to with what we bring. When medicine is practiced poorly, when engineering is done badly, when cooking is unsanitary, people can get hurt. Despite well intentioned efforts, patients can die,

bridges can collapse, and families can get sick. In the same way, short-term mission efforts done poorly can cause damage, sometimes great damage.

**Are we actually serving our American “idols?”**

By definition, short-term missions have only a short time in which to “show a profit,” to achieve predefined goals. This can accentuate our American idols of speed, quantification, compartmentalization, money, achievement, and success. Projects become more important than people. The wells dug. Fifty people converted. Got to give the church back home a good report. Got to prove the time and expense was well worth it. To get the job done (on our time scale), imported technology becomes more important than contextualized methods. Individual drive becomes more important than respect for elders, for old courtesies, for taking time. We end up dancing like elephants. We dance hard, and we have big feet.

**Whose needs are really served?**

Short-term missions, if they are used primarily to meet our own needs, become selfish, self-centered. *We need* to expand our worldviews, for example. *We need* to strengthen relationship among our church members. *We need* to stimulate giving to our church mission projects. To provide wholesome service activities for our youth and adults. *We need* to be sensitized to suffering. Yes, short-term missions trips can meet these needs. But, we must ask ourselves, do

we have the right to *use* others to get our needs met?

Mission is at the heart of life with God.

Americans have much to give. But, those of us involved in short-term missions need to watch out for quick-fix approaches and self-serving agendas.

### **Principles for effective short-term ministry**

Here are five principles that will help make your next short-term experience constructive, not damaging:

1. Get a comprehensive overview of what Christians are doing already in your destination country. Then be prepared to adapt to those priorities.
2. As people going for short-term, be connected to long-term projects. Be sure this is done at the invitation of the locals.
3. Nurture long-term relations between those who send, those who go, and those who receive. Make sure there are multi-year and multi-level series of exchanges
4. Work with, or develop, local leaders. Help build self-sustaining structures which progressively empower other leaders and other structures in the host country.
5. Train all the participants on short-term mission team thoroughly. Train, train, train.

### **Server in the context of national expertise**

Let's take a look at how these principles can be applied.

As an example: Is construction your call? Before you take another team of builders overseas, help the people in your host country to organize so they can eventually run the building operation themselves. This may mean finding national Christians who are economists, or development specialists, or contractors to work with you. Look for

experienced nationals who can consult on the project, including legal issues.

Maybe you can help the local community set up a cooperative organization, working together while they gain experience. Maybe this will mean inviting an agency with expertise, such as World Vision, to partner with you.

Eventually there will be a place for your team of short-term builders. But that may be months or even years down the road. If you go sooner, you may be meeting your own needs more than the needs of those you claim to serve.

### **Using local resources to meet local needs**

People should feel empowered when you leave. This is the lasting result of a successful short-term mission trip. Your national hosts should feel more confident about using locally available resources to solve their own problems. Why? Because that is what you have modeled.

Ask yourself: Can you operate peacefully without e-mail, a computer, or a fax?

Without electricity or a car? If not, what do you model for people who **MUST** operate that way?

Do you buy the resources for your projects locally, thereby supporting the national economy and affirming the use of indigenous materials? Do you keep within a budget that the indigenous agency could maintain? This applies to construction supplies. It applies also to office supplies and equipment, to medical supplies, and to teaching materials like books, videos and tapes.

“That item just isn't available here,” you may be told. Yes, sometimes you will need to import material. But let that be the exception rather than the rule.

First, check what resources local professionals use. One example is Anne Thomas who trains teachers of reading in a government program. Her work is in

isolated provinces in Laos. Wherever she is, the first thing she must do is to make books. She does that using the silkscreen method, a local resource.

Before you import material for a Christian children's camp, are you sure there is no church or mission among this ethnic group anywhere in the world that has produced material for them? In most languages, the Jesus video is available. Sooner or later these people are going to have to write Christian books, Sunday school materials, etc. What are you doing to encourage that creativity?

### **Perhaps we should go, first of all, for our own education**

"My grandchild went on a short-term trip and came home a new person!" This happens so often that we start thinking, "If it costs a little minor imperialism to save our grandchildren, well, nothing's perfect." A woman writes to me. "How else can my grandkids experience suffering?"

After all, our young people—and our mid-lifers—and our seniors—actually, all of us whatever our stage in life—do need to go on pilgrimage. From Abraham, to the Aeneid, to the Apollo moon landing, the journey is a classic motif for growth.

If we are honest with ourselves we will have to admit that a short-term mission trip is often primarily an educational experience in which we are the learners.

That's good. But, a learner learns best out of humble spirit of non-interference. And that can conflict with our stated desire for active service.

So a check on our motives may be in order. Do we need to be needed? Are we driven to solve problems? Must we provide a report of achievements for our donors? Such concerns can breed a subtle arrogance. By contrast, if we see short-term missions as education, we will be more ready to learn

humbly. This need not preclude service, but it may well reorder the way we go about it.

### **Starting right here-at-home may be best**

For all of us there may be another alternative we should explore first. Poverty suffering and cross-cultural color. Fiesta and friends. All are right across town. In my home city, Seattle, for example, ninety languages are spoken.

For unskilled youth, in particular, this may be the place to start. Suppose an ethnic church and a main-culture church in the same city would exchange youth groups for the month of July, with the kids moving into each other's homes. Scary? A journey? Yes. The results would reverberate for decades in that city.

A journey of ten thousands miles may begin on a local bus. This is not glamorous. We may prefer "Afghan-istanitis" that is serving exotic people in exotic places. How much more exciting (and how much more under our control) that overseas trip may be than befriending Mexicans across town. After all, who knows but that they might show up on our doorstep for an exchange visit! Yet when these local Mexicans or Afghans or Vietnamese commend us to their families in their distant homelands, we will be welcomed there for long-term mission rooted in relationships.

In any case, what benefits us, or our grandchildren, is not the top priority. Mission is not therapy. Christ did not come primarily to enhance his own experience. He came to serve, and he started with what was near at hand.

### **Is some of it a waste of money?**

"Americans have to see it to support it," we hear. Is that really true?

Yes, people give to people. But not everybody needs a video of themselves on the field.

We just need to know somebody in the project. We need to feel that we are a vital part of the teams of sender, goers, and receivers. And, we need to be kept up to date personally.

When it comes to financial support, American Christians aren't stupid. We can understand basic math.

"I've gotten five letters in the past couple of weeks from friends who are going overseas on two-week trips. I wonder if the Lord's money couldn't be spent better?" confided my well-to-do friend Evelyn. "I mean I gave to each one. But from a financial point of view, I hate to take away from the people who are there for the long-term, and then have to come home for lack of resources." A "gotta-see-it-to-support-it" mentality simply lets too many Christians off the hook.

Sometimes we seem to be saying "if you're really committed, go on a short-term trip. Otherwise, just go shopping at the mall." But that split is perverse. Every Christian is called to care, and every Christian can find a place as a part of a team concerned for global mission where personal relationships are vibrant.

### **Training that lasts**

How well are your short-term team members trained?

First, consider spiritual factors. Do they know the great themes of Scripture? Can they discuss "difficult questions" with non-Christians? Can they share their own stories? Can they help a new Christian grow? Are they faithful in their own personal practice of daily spiritual disciplines?

Even the carpenter, the surgeon, and the "closed country" visitor—whose witnesses are largely "Christian presence"—need to be able to give an answer for the hope that is in them.

Well-prepared teams can witness in the most formidable places. I found such a team in Mauritania enjoying regular opportunities. But poorly prepared teams will let the chances of a lifetime slip through their fingers. I've met teams like that, too.

Then consider the cultural knowledge and interpersonal skills that your team members need to be effective. Training in this area will include contextualized apologetics—ideas on how to express the Christian faith in terms of the local great religion, worldview, values, and felt needs. Team members also should know the history of the Church in the particular country to which they are going.

And, don't forget practical details. Of the many short-term teams I have helped to train recently, at least two plan to house their members individually in local homes (in Brazil and Russia). I heartily recommend this where possible. But, this excellent strategy reminds us of the need for practical preparation.

### **Elephants who dance delicately**

A few years ago, a group in a church in Oregon met to study and pray about missions. Up to this point there had been little mission interest in this church. The group recommended sending a short-term team to the Wolof of Senegal, a Muslim people, which the church did. This was an educational, get-acquainted trip. Back home again, the team reported on the Wolof's need for water.

The church decided to raise a few thousand dollars for World Vision to dig wells. In due course, the wells were dug. The next year, a half dozen Senegalese villages invited the church to send a team to join with them in parties celebrating the water. After all, friendship means laughing together, as well as solving problems together.

On this second trip, not only did the team celebrate the water, but they also discovered an evangelist to the Wolof. This servant of God was sent out from a nearby people group. Now short-term teams from the Oregon church are working with this evangelist, in the context of a web of established friendships.

My own church, University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, has been working in Albania since 1991. During the first five years of our work, 22 members from UPC gave a total of 57 years of service in that country. Some were long term (from a commitment of 2-5 years to a lifetime focused on Albanians). And, many others were short-term. All were needed.

In Albania, all our people fitted into long term work that progressively empowered local leaders. In particular, we worked closely with a local evangelical church association and with a local university student ministry. Both began just seven years ago. Today both these networks run themselves.

To sum up, connect short-term mission participants with long term projects. And not just any project but ones that are owned and run by indigenous Christians.

Will it always go smoothly? Will it always be a piece of cake?

No. Some indigenous Christians, like many here in America, are self-serving. Others are not well trained or gifted for the roles in which they are cast. Welcome to real life, at home or abroad!

**In real life, in real world missions there is always risk**

Ambiguity, the possibility of failure, different understandings of financial accountability and standards of excellence, the need for training—all these issues must be faced. There is no short cut.

To give the members of our supporting churches the idea that mission is always

simple, always convenient, always pure, and always successful does not jibe with Christian realities, or human realities. No friends are perfect. No program works fully, or forever. But love covers a multitude of sins. And when we have discovered fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters in another place through the work of the gospel, how rich that love can be.

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