Short-Term Missions and Dependency
By Robert Reese

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, President Bush at first sought to divert attention away from "the blame game," saying that the natural disaster required an active response instead of finger pointing. "We are problem solvers," he said, stressing that he and his officials were too occupied with meeting the immediate needs of hurricane victims to spend time assessing whose fault it was for the initial slow response to the crisis. Later, he accepted personal responsibility for the slow response, saying, "The buck stops here."

In general, Americans are known around the world as problem solvers. It is a cultural strength to be able to perceive what is going wrong and select an efficient way of fixing it. It is a cultural weakness, however, to be so over-confident of our abilities that we fail to assess the cultural and historical background of a situation before applying our solution. In New Orleans, for example, emergency preparedness experts apparently failed to take into account the local situation where thousands of people lacked the means of leaving town when the evacuation orders were given.

Short-term missions illustrate this point. Teams from the United States fan out across the globe to do Christian missions of mercy and evangelism, but they usually know little of the local situations that they encounter. They see things that American ingenuity can fix and they have the means to do it, so they proceed to solve the problem in the few days they have in the foreign country and return home satisfied with a job well done. They may not see, however, the long-term results of their quick-fix solution.

Jo Ann van Engen says bluntly:

> Because short-term groups often want to solve problems quickly, they can make third-world Christians feel incapable of doing things on their own. Instead of working together with local Christians, many groups come with a let-the-North-Americans-do-it attitude that leaves nationals feeling frustrated and unappreciated. Since the groups are only around for about a week, the nationals end up having to pick up where they left off—but without the sense of continuity and competence they might have had if they were in charge from the beginning. (2000:22)

Short-term missions may unwittingly contribute to a feeling of powerlessness among the very people that they seek to help. This in turn creates dependency.

What is Dependency?
We can define dependency as the unhealthy reliance on foreign resources, personnel, and ideas, which stifles local initiative. It is expecting someone else to do for you what you could do for yourself. In mission history, dependency resulted from western missionaries importing foreign forms of worship, church organization, institutions, and theology during the colonial period. Indigenous people could not operate such foreign systems and

found they had to depend on outsiders to run them. It is for this reason that some churches in developing nations continue to be weak and ineffective.

When I noticed the extent of this problem during my own missionary work in Zimbabwe from 1981 to 2002, I decided to research the issue for my doctoral dissertation. During the research, I interviewed a mission executive who worked with one of the largest mission agencies in the world. He was also familiar with the historical situation in Zimbabwe. When I asked him what factors are prolonging dependency after the end of colonialism, he responded that short-term missions are creating dependency on a far larger scale than colonial missions ever did! When I asked him to explain that statement, he said that short-term volunteers are currently supplying pastors in Zimbabwe with all sorts of money and equipment from computers to cars, without accountability for their use. Church members become amazed that their pastor is driving a new car and has money to send his children to the best schools, or to visit foreign countries, while they remain in poverty (Reese 2005:151). These members become understandably disconnected from their pastor and his ministry, since he is no longer theirs. They have become powerless through the good intentions of strangers.

In this article, I will not deal with the limited number of short-term missions that handle humanitarian crises, since these must be treated in a different way from people who are not in life-or-death situations, even though they may be poor. Rather, I will look at ways that standard short-term missions can avoid creating dependency through a few simple considerations.

The Growth of Short-Term Missions
Short-term mission trips have become a phenomenon that deserves attention. Missiologists have debated the effects of this trend on world missions in general. Ralph Winter described short-term missions as "drive-by missions" and "amateurism in missions" (1998:4), reflecting a concern that the trend could divert attention and resources away from the serious effort of reaching the unreached peoples of the world through long-term commitments. Gary Corwin, on the other hand, took a pragmatic view that, since short-term missions are more than a passing fad, missiologists should find ways of working with the phenomenon rather than merely complain about it (2000:422-3). Douglas W. Terry even warned, "The academy must discover how to accept and incorporate this tsunami of fresh energy and personnel into its models of world mission, or it risks becoming irrelevant" (2004:174).

Corwin noted the motivation behind the growth of short-term missions: "The enormous popularity of short-term missions is a reflection of local churches' desire to be involved more directly in global missions" (2000:422). Local churches are simply trying to provide average church members with "hands-on" experiences in other cultures. Often these American churches use the facilities of mission agencies both for pre-field orientation and for guidance on the field. Sometimes the volunteers work under the direct supervision of a career missionary on the field. Many other such groups, however, follow their own agendas without assistance from mission agencies or missionaries.

Richard Slimbach estimated that 450,000 short-term missionaries were sent from North America in 1998 (2000:441), calling this a "short-term avalanche" (2000:428). According to Scott Moreau, United States mission agencies reported that a total of 346,270 short-term workers (defined as going from two weeks to one year) were sent out in 2001 (Welliver and Northcutt 2004:13). He adds, "we assume that this still represents only a small fraction of the total U.S. short-term workers, since it does not include those who went under the auspices of local churches or on their own" (Welliver and Northcutt 2004:33). Roger Peterson, Gordon Aeschliman, and R. Wayne Sneed estimate that one million short-term volunteers went out in 2003 (2003:243). One can only guess how many short-term workers are moving from North America around the globe in 2007, but it must be a staggering number. The question is what kind of impact does this movement have for the cause of Christ? To answer this adequately, we need to examine another current phenomenon, globalization.

Short-Term Missions and Globalization
The trend toward short-term missions is part of the much wider phenomenon of globalization. Declaring, "The world is flat," Thomas Friedman indicates that technological innovations have enabled businesses to operate from anywhere with multinational work forces. He cites this as the newest wave of globalization (2005:5). Since Christian missions are also global, globalization is bound to have an impact on missions; globalization is, in fact, driving some mission methods. But what exactly is globalization?

Briefly, globalization is the current movement toward a single world economy. Characterizing the process of globalization as "McWorld," Tom Sine says, "We already have now a 'new one-world economic order'" (1999:50). This movement has greater significance since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, leaving the United States as the sole superpower. There is now a widespread assumption that not only capitalism, but also American values will capture the entire world. Thus, globalization carries cultural and political overtones along with economic ones.

Jeffrey Sachs, an economist who advises the United Nations as well as many developing nations, points out that globalization is not really a new phenomenon. The first wave of modern globalization was the European colonial era, "globalization under European domination . . . [with] the infamous 'white man's burden,' the right and obligation of European and European-descended whites to rule the lives of others around the world." (2005:43). This raises an important question: Is globalization a period of neocolonialism with an American face instead of a European one? Or is it a period of history that promises to end global poverty through increased international cooperation? One thing is certain: the era of globalization is one where economics is the guiding social science and global poverty is the number one issue to be addressed.

Many (relatively wealthy) North American evangelicals have seized on globalization as a means of bringing progress and American solutions to the rest of the world. Terry lists globalization as a contributing component of short-term missions, saying, "Globalization . . . enables the short-term movement technically, informationally, and financially"

(2004:174). In general, North American Christians agree with Sachs and rock star Bono that they can eradicate global poverty and disease through a concerted effort of governments, aid agencies, churches, and American donations. Even if short-term workers are initially motivated by a sense of adventure, they usually see global poverty up close and take that as a worthy cause to tackle. For example, van Engen criticizes short-term missions in general for superficial responses to poverty, but challenges them: "Money invested in learning about the causes of poverty in developing nations—and what can be done—is money well spent" (2000:23).

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life* and founding pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, recently embarked on world missions with the PEACE Plan. Warren identified five global giants as obstacles to be tackled in world missions: spiritual emptiness, egocentric leadership, poverty, disease, and illiteracy. In response to each of these giants he proposed the acronym PEACE to represent the following strategy for world missions: "Plant new churches, or partner with existing ones; Equip leaders; Assist the poor; Care for the sick; Educate the next generation" (Morgan 2005:35). It is noteworthy that Warren intends to do all this through short-term missions. Clearly the social aspects of this mission will take the most resources and initiative. For this part of the PEACE Plan, Warren teams up with celebrities like Bono and Bill Gates in the ONE campaign to fight poverty and disease (Williams 2006). All sorts of people, Christians and non-Christians, politicians and economists, want to overturn the fact that globalization has so far created a growing gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Sachs admits that whereas "all parts of the world had a roughly comparable starting point in 1820 (all very poor by current standards), today's vast inequalities reflect the fact that some parts of the world achieved modern economic growth while others did not" (2005:29). He classifies one billion people as "the 'extreme poor' of the planet, . . . all fighting for survival each day." An additional 1.5 billion are relatively poor, experiencing "chronic financial hardship and a lack of basic amenities" (2005:18). This combined sector of extremely and relatively poor people encompasses 40 percent of global population. Sachs suggests that current globalization offers hope for fairness and justice to prevail, provided that western wealth is used for positive gains in the developing world. He cites the Marshall Plan that helped to rebuild Europe after World War II as a model for how the United States should now use its resources to improve conditions where poverty is entrenched (2005:341-2).

Some evangelicals would like to implement a Marshall Plan for Christ in response to the global economic inequities (Rowell 2006:141-4); short-term mission is one way they can take action directly. They form partnerships with under-funded ministries in the developing countries that they visit. Eager to solve global problems with American money and technology, they plunge in with solutions before they understand the local situations and forge financial relationships with people they scarcely know. The stage is set for creating massive dependency in the developing world.

The Impact of Short-Term Missions
Don Parrott warned that short-term missions may reflect "an anti-long-term sentiment . . . [as] many churches are caught up in a craze for partnerships" (2004:357), sometimes leaving out career missionaries in order to connect with local Christians. Slimbach also warned that the "benevolent paternalism" of traditional western missions continued to be perpetuated by short-term missions. He added that he had "rarely heard any serious reflection on the ways in which short-term missions activities . . . might actually do more harm than good." (2000:429-30). For example, he noted:

> [Short-term missionaries tended to identify with] the tourist group, [while locals] assessed commercial and political benefits of associating with these "outsiders." . . . Each party knows that the transactions will most likely be temporary and not repeated. This frees each from the constraints of a mutual, long-term relationship in order to act in terms of their own self-interest. (2000:431)

Where the scenario that Slimbach envisioned exists, the likelihood of dependency is real. It is also likely in situations where American activism encounters a slower way of life. Glenn Schwartz told of how American short-term missionaries created dependency in Guyana, South America, in a very short period of time. He reported that Americans built a church building in Guyana during a three-week stay. Two years later the Guyana Christians sent a message to the American builders to return because "the roof on your church building is leaking. Please come and fix it" (2004:12). This indicated that a significant factor in the issue of dependency is personal ownership of the project.

Steve Saint likewise reported that the Waodani ["Auca"] Indians of Ecuador had turned from independence in the 1960s to dependence in the 1990s because of short-term mission projects. Saint said that dependency had crept in through two types of well-meaning short-term missions–Bible conferences and building churches. Those Americans who conducted Bible conferences furnished rice and sugar to create "a big festive occasion"; since the Waodani could not duplicate this aspect, "they figured this is something that the outsiders do. So they never have a Bible conference of their own." Americans who built a church building for the Waodani likewise used material and methods beyond the capability of the local people. Saint noted that the result was that for almost two decades after that project, "the Huaorani, to my knowledge, have never built another building to be used for a place of worship" (Wood 1998:9).

The situation of the Waodani people illustrates how short-term missions can easily create dependency. The essence of short-term missions is to accomplish something significant, preferably visible, in a short time. Rick Johnson said that this satisfies the American cultural value of "immediate gratification" (2000:41), but the short-term volunteers may not consider the impact that they have on the local people. In the name of partnership, American Christians link up with local Christians:

> Groups are sent to 'fix up' their buildings, do their evangelism, preach in their services, lead vacation Bible schools. . . . Sadly, these churches find that their own efforts pale in comparison to the well-funded foreign campaigns. They can lose

their initiative. Some become corrupted, seeking an inside track to foreign groups and the resources they bring. The church may abandon its indigenous efforts and become dependent on the foreign support. (2000:42)

Johnson noted that American materialism and a sense of pity toward citizens of developing nations often combine to produce dependency on short-term trips. Visible poverty can create a compassionate reaction in the short-term missionary that combines with a sense of guilt for having so much wealth. This, in turn, can cause rash decisions that produce dependency. This may be done through actual donations of money or materials, or simply through making promises that are soon forgotten when the trip is over and the scenes of poverty have faded from memory. Both Stan May and John M. Tucker warned short-term groups about the harm caused by unfulfilled promises (May 2000:445; Tucker 2001:437). Bruce R. Reichenbach commented, "Consistent with their guilt-complex, the Western churches continually search for new ways to infuse financial and material aid into the Third World churches," so creating "money greed" (1982:170).

American churches that emphasize church autonomy are particularly susceptible to harm done by short-term missions, because local autonomy allows such groups to bypass long-term missionaries and mission agencies with ease. John Reese reported the testimony of a short-term worker who traveled to India:

The things that came to light during my second trip made me realize that all I had seen was a carefully staged charade aimed at separating Americans from their money. It seemed that what we had exported to India was not Christianity, but the same unholy worship of the Almighty Dollar that threatens to forever alienate our own nation from God. (2002:2)

Such abuses caused Slimbach to wonder, "Will short-terms be perceived as just one more of the many colonizing systems exported from America to the rest of the world?" (2000:435). Certainly, short-term missions present a challenge since it is not possible to "declare a moratorium on short-term missions" nor to "align ourselves with the new 'manifest destiny' of global Americanization" (Slimbach 2000:440).

What Can Be Done?
The link between short-term missions and economic globalization serves to cause many people in the developing world to see the phenomenon as a continuation of colonial missions. Westerners come bringing short-term solutions to long-term problems without asking local people what they know and are doing about these issues. The powerful and wealthy move out into the world to rescue it from all its ills in the name of Christ, who lived as a pauper. Less scrupulous people in the developing world see the movement as a "gravy train" that they try to flag down so it will make a brief stop at their station. We say "brief" because the recipients of short-term missions' largesse are not looking for in-depth relationships, which serious missions would require. As in the case of colonial missions when those with abundant resources ministered to those with few, the results are deepening dependency that stifles local initiative.

Since short-term missions will continue for the foreseeable future, what steps should be taken to ensure better results? Several steps are fairly obvious. We can classify them in three broad categories: better training, integration of short-term missions with long-term strategy, and a commitment to avoid creating dependency.

Better Training

Evaluation is a major tool for North Americans in most fields of endeavor, so it makes perfect sense to evaluate short-term missions too. As churches and Christian groups gain experience from multiple excursions abroad, hopefully they will begin to have questions about those experiences. What impact has the short-term mission had, not solely on the volunteers who went, but more especially on the people they visited? The impact on the people visited is clearly more difficult to assess, but this only makes the question more crucial, since mission by its very nature seeks to know its impact on those it ministers to. The answer to this question will indicate the direction training must take.

By stressing the target people, cultural issues become prominent. Cross-cultural sensitivity will be the most immediate training need, accompanied by studies of the cultural, linguistic, religious, and historical background of the people visited. What is their worldview and how does it compare to the normal North American worldview? For this important information there is an increasing number of helps (Johnstone and Mandryk 2001; Livermore 2006, Burnett 2002).

Included in the need for better cross-cultural communication is the fundamental principle of putting human relationships ahead of tasks. Generally, North Americans tend to put tasks first. For short-term missions, this is especially true because of time constraints to complete some project that will preferably have visible results. Whereas a particular project may be in the forefront of the volunteers' minds, the people visited will probably rather be fascinated by the visitors themselves. This is because most cultures value relationships over tasks and the people visited probably feel little or no time pressure for the short-term mission project. Good training before going, therefore, will take the emphasis off of time and task and transfer it to building relationships with local people.

This is not just a cultural issue, because people must always take precedence in God's work. If the people visited are not Christians, then interaction with them is crucial for the testimony that the short-term missionaries will leave behind. If the local people are Christians, then fellowship with them in God's work is essential, as they must carry on with whatever work remains after the volunteers depart.

Integration with Long-Term Strategy

The need to be people-oriented leads logically to the need for long-term strategy. The best short-term missions will become so concerned with the impact that they are having that they will desire to integrate their own short-term goals with long-term planning. This leads naturally to more interaction with professional missionaries or local Christian leaders in the places the volunteers want to visit regularly. By asking field missionaries or indigenous leaders how the short-term mission might fit into long-term goals, the focus will again shift away from the volunteers' needs to the needs on the field.

By focusing on a specific people in one place for a longer period, the short-term mission will be taking a major step toward developing important relationships. When long-term goals take precedence, this increases the vision and purpose of each trip, which now becomes part of a larger plan. Training becomes more directed. Now the short-term missions can start to take advantage of all the wealth of mission history, writings, and field expertise. Even with this advantage, it may not be sufficient to overcome dependency, since many long-term missions also created this problem, but at least it is an essential step.

Avoiding Dependency
Colonial missions, especially of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, created dependency on a large scale by importing foreign institutions, ideas, and funding which indigenous people could not control, but eventually could not do without. When short-term missions continue in this fashion, they inadvertently conform to a long-established, but flawed mission model. Local people will automatically see the volunteers as an extension of colonialism when missionaries were expected to give and local people to receive. It becomes easy to slide back into comfortable but damaging co-dependent relationships. By co-dependent, I mean that local people are used to asking for and receiving material goods, while the donors receive a good feeling from helping people in need. Recipients even learn to place donors on a pedestal in return for favors granted.

In the case of a short-term mission, the proclivity to create dependency is even greater if long-term contact is not maintained. The short-term aspect creates a lack of accountability that colonial missions had, since the two sides stayed in contact with each other. In the case of short-term missions, neither side may really care about the ultimate outcome as long as the interaction feels good at the time.

The way to avoid dependency is to keep some simple rules like those of environmental clubs that insist that hikers in nature leave a minimum of physical traces of their passing presence. By traveling light and having an agenda of learning and sharing on a level of equality, short-term missions will avoid rushing in to help before understanding a situation. The goal is to create no dependency by keeping an eye on the future of the ministry in that place. Here are a few simple rules:
1. Do nothing for others that they can do for themselves. This eliminates most building projects, because most cultures have been building suitable structures with local materials for countless generations. The only way to justify a building project is if it fits into a long-term plan and can be done under the leadership of local people.
2. Let the local people determine your project. Assuming that there are responsible and mature local Christians, becoming their servant will be the most important exercise a short-term missionary could have.
3. Undertake no project that is not sustainable by local people. This eliminates most medical short-term missions. Whereas local people may be grateful for free medical care, there will always be some who fail to receive treatment or whose chronic illnesses will not be helped by short-term engagements. How much better would it be if western Christians actually improved health care year round by training local people in their art?

In other words, a better short-term project would empower the local people to deal with their own medical problems.

4. Don't create expectations that will burden future short-term missions in that place. By keeping an eye on the future, it will be easier to refuse to create dependency despite the temptations to do so. Most problems of poverty and disease are long-standing and have no simple solutions, so it is better to do the little that the short-term mission can do without making promises about what will be accomplished. Giving away lots of free materials will not only create dependency but may also set a precedent that future groups will find hard to follow. Charging small fees for services, for example, can actually add dignity to the transaction and make the project more sustainable.

Beginning with just a few such simple steps may improve short-term missions from being a well-meaning but harmful exercise to one that contributes to world mission in a positive way. It may be helpful to ask how we would respond to swarms of short-term volunteers from other nations who came to do good in our neighborhood and then apply the Golden Rule. Certainly we would appreciate those who treated us and our culture with dignity and respect.

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