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Teaching Through Guided Reflection on Short-Term Missions

Abstract

This paper was presented at Asbury Theological Seminary on March 14, 2014, at the Interdisciplinary Colloquium. This work examines the three sections of a short-term missions trip: pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip. These sections have unique opportunities for teaching, and each must be navigated with different types of teaching and guided reflection.

Keywords: disorientation, reflection, short-term missions, teaching, transformation

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Introduction

Many churches engage in short-term missions (STM) and probably have good intentions when they start.¹ Good intentions, however, do not always cause positive long-lasting effects. As Proverbs 19:2 says, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.” It is not good for a heart surgeon to have zeal and to have skipped classes in medical school. It is not good for construction workers to be hasty in constructing a building and ignore the advising engineers. It is not good for people to proceed on STM with passion and excitement and ignore the different cultural context to which they are going. This verse suggests to STM around the world that respectable intentions are not enough. There must be formational teaching and guiding aspects to STM (Powell and Griffin 2009). This paper applies the pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip model of understanding STM, with guided reflection, disorientation, and teaching being the significant aspects of transformation.

Pre-Trip

People attending short-term mission trips need training through teaching and experience before the trip. Many of them will be at different levels of spiritual maturity and of knowledge and adaptability in cross-cultural settings. Three main aspects of pre-trip training are needed: (1) experiences together for the team to bond, (2) group Bible studies on certain topics, and (3) sessions on cultural studies.

The first aspect needed in pre-trip training is for the team to get to know each other and bond with each other before their trip. Sometimes the team is constructed of people that have never met each other, and expecting the team to completely succeed together without knowing each other before the trip is too high of an expectation. The second aspect needed in the pre-training of the short-term missionaries is Bible study sessions on select topics. Many topics could be covered, but surveyed here are two topics: being sent and serving. The first Bible study session is on the topic of God being a sending God. Throughout the scriptures, God continually sends people. God called and sent Abraham by asking him to leave his home and travel to a distant land. Then, at the fullness of time, God sent forth the Son to the world. God sends prophets, the Son, and the

Spirit into the world. Short-term missionaries should realize that they are sent to participate in God's mission of seeing the salvation of God come to all people.

The second biblical topic to be covered is serving. Many references or biblical characters exemplifying service could be examined, but one only is covered here. Epaphroditus is a person in the New Testament that receives little attention, but is an excellent example of someone participating in short-term service (Philippians 2:25-30). The three descriptive terms Paul uses for Epaphroditus are important in relation to service in STM (Daniels 2008: 21-24). First, Paul calls him "my brother." Paul had difficult times in Rome, and Epaphroditus assisted him in this period of adversity. Daniels mentions how Christian brothers and sisters on STM can encourage long-term missionaries. He says, "Nothing quite hits the spot like a short visit from a truly like-minded Christian" (2008: 22). Second, Paul states he is his "fellow worker," and "fellow worker" applied to STM could mean that the short-term missionaries should not expect a vacation trip, but a trip of hard work with their fellow missionary. Short-term mission workers on service trips should realize it takes great effort to make pathways into new cultures (Daniels 2008: 23). Third, Paul calls him a "fellow soldier." Epaphroditus almost died in his service to Jesus Christ and endured the hardship he faced while serving Paul in his work. This could imply that the short-term missionary must be disciplined, tough, and able to withstand hardships.

The third and essential aspect of teaching to be completed before the trip is for everyone on the team to read *Ministering Cross-Culturally*, taking the values test in the book (Lingenfelter and Mayers 2003: 27-35). After the test is taken, the team leaders should teach three sessions on cultural values, with each week covering two sets of different values. The first cultural session is on time- and event-oriented cultures (37-50) and on the differences between dichotomistic and holistic thinking (51-64). The second session covers crisis and non-crisis orientation (65-76) as well as the distinction between task and person orientation (77-89). The last session looks at status and achievement focus (91-99), and then the concealment of and willingness to expose vulnerability (101-112).

During the Trip

On the trip the short-term missionaries will have many experiences, and they need to reflect on those experiences. Some experiences will not make sense to them, and most days on the trip will be different from their own culture. When people are in a cross-cultural setting in which their present life does not match their own culture, they can enter a state of disorientation. When they are mentally, emotionally, and physically disconnected from what is happening around them, they experience cognitive dissonance. They search for meaning to make sense of reality, and what was previously thought of as normal is no longer normal.

Short-term missionaries enter this state of disorientation and are making meaning out of the experiences they have in the new culture. Short-term missionaries will strongly bond with the meanings they create to make sense of their reality. If they are left to themselves to create meaning out of the confusion, they project their own value system onto their experiences instead of understanding the value system of the different culture. For instance, the short-term missionary sees locals smiling, looking or staring at them and the short-termer sometimes concludes, "These people are smiling at me; therefore, they are happy in their poverty." This interpretation of the symbol of a smile is based on their projection on the smile, while the locals may have another meaning attached to the symbol of a smile. Are the locals smiling to be nice? Does a smile in this culture mean that the locals feel awkward as an outsider stares at them? The short-term missionary, in this case, also projects the idea of poverty onto the local people, when the locals may not, in their own minds, think that they are poor.

Many experiences create a sense of disorientation on the trip: eating different foods, going to a local market, being in the minority, hearing people speak different languages, and not being able to communicate with some of the local people. All of these disorienting experiences need reflection. The team reflects together on their daily experiences and the leader asks, "What happened today that felt awkward? What happened today that seemed out of place to you or did not make sense? Was there a time when you felt overwhelmed?" Some of the short-term missionaries will create their meanings out of these events, while some may not be able to process all of their experiences. It is a pertinent teaching opportunity as they process their disorienting and complicated experiences. The leaders on

the STM and the hosts help the short-term missionaries make sense out of their experiences.

Leaders on the trip should discuss relevant Bible passages with the group about the disorienting experiences of the day. Vital verses to be discussed are 1 Corinthians 13:9-12. Verse twelve says that, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” These verses can show to the short-termers that everything they see, they only see it partially. They see but they do not fully see and they see through a glass darkly. This is a critical realist epistemology

In my experience, it is usually the STM leaders who help the group with the reflection process, but if the hosts can assist in this process, it places the hosts as teachers to the team. The hosts can explain to the team about the hosts’ culture and help them process the cultural differences. On the STM I went on to Jamaica, we had a time of reflection each evening. The group would come together and talk about the events of the day. Most of the team would write in their journal, processing their experiences that day. Some of them struggled to eat the Jamaican food and a few of the events we experienced were overwhelming for them. However, this reflection process slowed the team down, got us praying together, and talking about what happened that day.

Short-term missionaries depend on the hosts to guide them through daily activities and they come to understand the hosts, their stories, backgrounds, and the issues in this local context. Scripture verses that can be discussed are: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 and Romans 12:4-6. These speak about how everyone is part of the body of Christ and how each part needs to depend on each other.

Initial Post-Trip: The Preliminary Debrief

Too often teams come home and never meet again to discuss and pray about what happened on their trip. They may have a short presentation at their church about their trip, which can be informative, but more is needed than a presentation of what happened on the trip. An initial debriefing is needed the last day of the trip or a day or two after the team arrives home. They stop and reflect on their trip and they are asked, “What did you take away from this trip? What did you learn on this trip? How is God leading you in the future because of what you experienced?” If

some of the short-term missionaries' responses are, "I'm so happy that I wasn't born in poverty. I'm so thankful to be an American," or "Wow, those people are gross. I can't wait to have a hot shower at home," then the leaders of the trip need to work with them and guide them to a better reflection. However, if some of the short-term missionaries say, "I was overwhelmed by what I experienced at that orphanage. I think I need to consider working with children back home," or "I never realized it until the trip, but there are immigrants in my own back yard. Perhaps I don't need to go on another trip, but I think I should become friends with my neighbor who just moved to the U.S.," then the leaders can encourage them to follow through with these desires.

It should be noted that when teams go to an orphanage, a red light district, or a refugee camp, they might not be able to articulate and process what they witnessed. A leader on the short-term mission should not push team members to verbally process what they experienced because it may take months for them to adequately make meaning out of their experiences. The leaders on the team should be patient with the short-term missionaries and not expect that they are able to process everything they experienced immediately after the trip.

Post-Trip: Continuing Transformation

After the team comes home, they should continue to meet together for ongoing transformation, reflection, discussion, and prayer, looking for specific ways in which they feel led to live differently because of their trip. If they met together for three months pre-trip, they should meet together for three months post-trip, with this expectation being conveyed before the trip. Meeting together does not have to be formal with a session and a topic, but they can meet together to eat or go for coffee to reflect on their experiences. In this reflecting, they need to determine how they should change because of the trip.

Kolb and Fry proposed four phases where people learn from what they experienced: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb and Fry 1975). The short-term missionaries have the concrete experiences and they step back from their experiences, reflecting and observing them. The reflection is where the meaning is constructed, and short-term missionaries make

generalizations or abstract conceptualizations. They then apply the generalizations or conceptions to their life and the team, and they then actively try something different in their own context. The reflection process plays a large role in positive transformation back home for the team members. As Linhart says, “The learning process could begin at any point, but it generally begins when someone acts in the here-and-now and then reflects or observes the results of that action. Upon reflection a person would arrive at some concept or principle that would construct a connection between the experience and the general principle under which the instance falls” (Linhart 2010: 175).

Here is one example of ongoing transformation after the trip. The first example is a group of women from the U.S. who started a social network through which STM became an avenue for a not-for-profit medical group to continue to travel to Africa. The women saw the people on the short-term mission as “needy,” wanted to care for the least of these, and established this cross-cultural tie. The women functioned as a resource and cultural brokers in this connection (Priest 2009).

In the reflection process, one of the new behaviors that should be strongly promoted is to become friends with, and be with, people of other cultures in their own context. If the “other” culture and people on the short-term mission trip were thrilling and exciting, but if the immigrants in their own back yard are ignored, then deeper transformation has not taken root.

Conclusion

Utilizing the pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip framework with STM grants the leaders and the hosts a helpful way of looking at STM. Each section of the trip requires different types of teaching and leading. Before the trip, the concentration of the teaching is on Biblical and cultural content, and the purpose is for the short-term missionaries to engage with scripture and be more cross-culturally competent as a result of the pre-trip training. During the trip, the leaders and the hosts should guide the short-term missionaries as they make meanings out of their experiences, particularly as they experience disorientation. The post-trip formation is vital for short-term missionaries because what they experienced on their trip should change how they live as Christians at home. If short-termers

are more ethnocentric after the trip, one must take a serious look at how the teams are led. However, as suggested in this paper, disorientation and guided reflection on this disorientation are needed for transformation.

End Notes

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