

RESEARCH AND SHORT TERM OUTREACHES

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*Does research have a place within the context of Short-term outreaches (STO'S)?
We strongly believe that research, or at least the researcher's attitude,
is needed much more in the process of doing both long- and short-term outreaches.*

A Case Study

A group undertook an outreach to an unreached area in West Africa. Their strategy was mass evangelism and everything was planned well. On arrival, they installed all equipment, welcomed everybody and started with the preaching as planned. Unfortunately, the attendance and response were poor and the group soon became discouraged. They left without much success, reporting that the area is spiritually very hard to reach and the people are not responding well to the Gospel. Some time later, another outreach group entered the area. Their strategy was house-to-house visitation, and they experienced the opposite reaction. The local people received them well and many came to know the Lord. It was later discovered that the difference in success could be ascribed to a cultural origin. The local people group believed that if you have something important to share, you do not proclaim it in public but you share it in the privacy of a home. Thus, conducting an open-air crusade there drew a poor reaction even though their outreach was well planned. Note that crusades as such are not wrong, but it certainly was not the best strategy to use with this people group.

Discovering hidden information about the group we want to reach could make our outreach efforts much more effective. Instead of just assuming we know the strongholds, cultural preferences or other social functions within the group, we can set out to learn under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what their problems, preferences, fears and hopes are in life, and in this way confirm or discover the real strongholds and entry points in the community. People communicating the Word of God in a given culture, can do so more effectively when they understand the culture or community in which they function.

Perceptions On Research

Some people see research in the context of missions and short-term outreaches as a waste of time or a lack of faith and trust in God's leading. Others think research is just for the professional or trained researcher. Some think it is good, but preaching the gospel and trusting God to do the right thing at the right time, is still more important than gathering information first. We maintain it is not a case of the one being more correct than the other. Research is part of the process, an integral part of any outreach programme, long-term or short-term, just as prayer, guidance by the Holy Spirit, planning, strategizing or training.

A Biblical Mandate for Research

"Send some men to explore the land of Canaan" (Numbers 13:1+2)

Many life principles are not explicitly mentioned or explained in the Bible, but were applied in the Old and New Testament. Research principles fall in this category. From the time of Abraham when God said He wanted to see if the situation was as bad as the outcry that reached Him from Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 18), to the church in Acts and the ministry of Paul, God is using information, observation, reporting, and interpretation of information. These elements of research were used to guide people in strategizing for war, prayer, preaching and reaching out to the lost. Some of the Biblical references to this are found in Gen. 42:11-16, Gen. 13:14-18, Numbers 1:1-2:34, Numbers 13 and 14, Joshua 2:1-24, 7:2-3, Nehemiah, Matt 9:35, John 4:35, Acts 2:41 and 47, 4:4, 5:14, 9:31. Jesus made use of parables and examples taken from His environment. Led by the Spirit, He still observed and took note of things around Him. He used them to explain truths about the Scriptures and about God.

Therefore, principles of research are part of God's strategy. He uses people and information in the process of reaching His world with the Gospel.

The Purpose of Research

The purpose of researching for an outreach is to understand God's plan better lest we try to impose our plan and ideas onto His. This is true for countries, people groups, and individuals. Learning what God is doing from the people whom God is working with, enables us to fit into His programmes and plan in a way that will contribute rather than contradict. We will be better prepared to identify and break the adverse strongholds and their effects in areas, people, and nations if we are willing to search with God for relevant

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information. Through the leading of His Spirit, we will discover the facts and information needed to more effectively reach the people He directed us to. This needed information will be gathered from the people, from the environment and from God's Spirit.

Methods and Elements of Research

Elements in the research process that can be used in preparing for an STO are (in random order): Home and literature research; Field research (Participant Observation); Report writing; Prayer letters; Prayer and mobilisation for prayer; Strategizing; and Actual Outreach / Reaching the unreached. We touch on some of these elements.

Prayer: This is of vital importance. You cannot gather information without the guidance of God at all levels. On the other hand, you cannot gather information and discover the spiritual bondage and need of people without being moved into prayer. Prayer, information and strategy are closely related in this process of research and must be part of any outreach.

Research at home: Team members should research the area and the people they are going to in advance. Lots of information available in libraries can help you understand the culture, economy, political and other aspects of their situation. Other sources of information are prayer letters by organisations working there, as well as interviews with and reports by people who have visited the area.

Research on the field: We have found the technique called Participant Observation to be the best approach for gathering information when language and time is a problem during an STO (see J.P. Spradley's book Participant Observation, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980). This approach will help you discover patterns and ways in which the people in that area function and you will be able to see the reality which is hidden behind the smiles and friendliness or the anger and hostility. This knowledge will provide useful results if used at the right time at the right place in the right way.

Above all, you need people to get the best information and for that, you need loving and trusting relationships. These are not built in a short time and the kind and quality of information depend on how much people trust and believe you. In this process your attitude matters very much.

Reports:

They are part of any well-organised outreach. The people sending you want feedback on what happened. People throughout the Bible also gave reports. For example, the disciples reported back to Jesus after being sent out (Luke 9:10, 10:17). The reports brought to Moses by the 12 spies in Numbers 13-14 show the vital importance of reporting correctly. Otherwise people may pray or plan inappropriately for the group being reached through an STO.

Reports often reflect the writers' own perception of their experiences, which could be far from the truth. Returning STO groups, wanting to be considered successful, may count converts by the number of hands that were raised and report that "Thousands have come to the Lord". This makes the senders of such groups very happy, but the missionary who has been working in that area for years may often ask the question, "Where are the thousands?" No change or transformation is seen in the community after the group has left. The validity of such reports can rightfully be questioned.

Your attitude matters:

Brewster, in his approach to learning a language (see p99) talks about the **LEARNER** and the **TOURIST attitude**.

Tourists move through an area superficially, take some pictures and videos and get the feeling of being taken out of one's comfort zones. They work with the masses without coming close to people. They experience some wonderful things spiritually that encourage them and that they take back home as memoirs. It is more like a holiday experience than a life commitment.

Learners are not satisfied with surface experiences, but try to find out as much as possible about the people they are reaching out to. They try to become friends in every way and see the other person as an equal. Trust is built and important hidden information is easily shared in such an environment.

The attitude of asking questions and being a learner will open a new world in your relationships on an STO and you will discover what God is doing on a new and spiritually deeper and exciting level.

Your attitude cannot be faked. One does not trust people easily with one's deepest feelings and the same is true in any culture you visit. If you do not love and open yourself, honestly seeking to serve the other, you will be tested and manipulated into superficial action, afterwards interpreting your action as successful.

Conclusion:

Research is much more an attitude than an event. Short-term outreaches are events within a bigger process/plan, which is under God's control. Research is a process that needs to be approached with the right attitude. With research, we set out to discover what God is doing in order to fit into God's plan with

whatever programme or strategy we design or plan. Our STO's need to be sensitive to the fact that we are fulfilling a wonderful purpose within the bigger plan of God, but that our actions now can open or close the doors for the Gospel in the future.

No commander sends his troops into an area without proper plans derived from good information gathered.

(Compare Luke 14:31-32)

No successful businessperson makes decisions without proper market research. (Compare Luke 14:28-30)

We as Christians also need to do our homework, lest we make conclusions or decide on a strategy that does not fit into God's plan.

Note: Inserv presents a Research course that can be done over a weekend or as a 5-day program. A very practical hands-on approach is followed where the issues mentioned above are addressed in more detail. Click on Research and Training for more information, or to arrange for us to come and train your group or church in the use of some basic Research Principles within the Kingdom of God.