

Critical Analysis Of Short-Term Outreaches. By Dr Nico Mulder

Short-term mission outreaches have come in for a lot of comment in South Africa, both for and against, justified or otherwise. Let us look at these comments impartially.

“Money for mission outreaches is scarce and should rather be used to finance missionaries or long-term outreaches.”

This is a legitimate viewpoint. It is indeed important to consider all financial implications carefully. Support for the missionaries or church of the country in question will probably accomplish more. The objective of the project should be weighed against the finances needed. The local church of the country could probably evangelise more effectively and also handle the funds better. A project which calls for manual labour and many hands, however, might be better served by an outreach team.

Sending churches and individuals usually get much more involved with their outreach team members than with their missionary. These churches and individuals are more easily mobilised to support mission work – even on a long-term basis. In this way a short-term outreach can have far-reaching and long-term effects. The missionaries on the field might gain more on the short term by receiving the money intended for the outreach, but they would probably benefit even more on the long-term by increased support as a result of a short-term outreach.

“Our own country needs evangelism. Why should you go to other places?”

It is very clear in Scripture, especially in Acts 1:8, that the Gospel should be preached at the same time both nationally and internationally (Jerusalem, Samaria and the ends of the earth). Granted, there is great need for evangelism in our own country, but in comparison, the need of people who do not even have the opportunity to hear the Gospel makes it imperative to go.

“Young people are not fit for the task. They lack dedication, knowledge and experience and do more harm than good.”

This is probably true in some cases. However, where will they get this dedication, knowledge and experience if they are not involved anywhere? Experience comes through exposure. Long-term missionaries are often made through short-term exposure. Young people should, however, be made aware of the graveness and responsibility of Kingdom work.

“Short-term outreaches do more harm than good on the mission field.”

Among so many outreaches to so many different destinations there are probably some who do harm. An outreach team who are not thoroughly prepared and trained and which goes into the field without proper planning is sure to cause harm. There have been recent examples. Such teams can foul any further outreach work in the area, or put back the missionary’s work for several years. Hopefully, this will be avoided in future.

Still, there are teams which do excellent work and whose support is requested by missionaries on the field. They are the teams who have been trained and prepared carefully. To say categorically “Short-term outreaches only cause harm,” is one-sided.

“Participants in short-term outreaches come back with negative experiences.”

Such cases do occur. Reasons for such negative experiences may be the following:

- § The participant may have had a wrong attitude from the very start.
- § The participants may not have been orientated and/or trained sufficiently for their task.
- § Leadership might have been insufficient.
- § An insensitive host unnecessarily exposes participants to negative situations.

The opposite is true in most cases. Participants return with a very positive attitude towards missions, which is a real boon for their sending church or organisation.

There are many examples of this.

“Short-termers return from an outreach spiritually superior.”

Some returning short-termers may be seen like this, especially by spiritual leaders.

Possible reasons for this may be:

- § The participants now have a wider view of what “church” really means. Now they are seeing faults in their own spiritual community. Maybe they are critical in order to remedy these shortcomings.
- § The different styles of worship in the places they went to have led to paradigm shifts in the short-termer’s own faith expression and they pressurise their home community to change.
- § The leaders have failed to teach their team members to be servants both on the outreach and at home on their return.
- § Reverse culture shock was not properly addressed by the leaders.

“Short-termers have problems adjusting to their home environment afterwards.”

Most team members suffer a measure of culture shock when they enter the receiving country. They usually adapt so well during the outreach that some need help to re-adjust on returning to their own culture. To counteract reverse culture shock, re-entry counselling should be done with members before, during and after an outreach.

“Participants change for the better on short-term outreaches. Afterwards their congregations find great value in them.”

Comments like these are often heard when participants in a short-term outreach have been well trained and prepared beforehand. Experiences on the outreach can broaden or change their frame of reference, to the good of the spiritual community to which they belong.

Did you know?

Short-term outreaches were held in the time of Jesus. He Himself sent disciples on evangelical missions which lasted days or weeks, sometimes without any funds. The purpose was to teach them to trust fully in God for every need. Their reports to Jesus showed positive results. Short-term outreaches can even today reflect the value Jesus meant them to have.

An empirical study done by STEM Ministries in the USA has confirmed the positive effect of outreaches and it corresponds to some extent with experiences in South Africa. The study interacted with 945 American organisers of outreaches that lasted at least 2 weeks. The following results showed:

- § Time spent in focused prayer increased with 237% after an outreach.
- § Prayer for outreach hosts and their countries doubled.
- § Money given for foreign missions doubled without affecting local offerings.

- § Offerings by outreach participants in their local congregations increased by 300%
- § Personal involvement with foreign missions increased. Involvement with mission related activities increased by 64%, and 84% of those that went on an outreach served on their local missions committee.
- § Three out of four outreach partakers returned to the mission field again as short-termers or for long-term involvement.
- § Local involvement with outreaches increased by 69%. Participants were more willing to become involved with community projects.
- § Evangelism became a higher priority than before in the lives of outreach participants.

A quotation from Eaton and Hurst summarises what a short-termer may experience: *“God takes us on a journey and then calls us to respond to Him. Certainly God can teach us to see, to understand, to feel, and to respond without leaving home. But the experience, profound and personal in its confrontation of need, may just be what our hearts need to learn of the compassion of Christ.”* (Vacation with a Purpose, 1991, p28)