

Short Term Mission Trips: The Good, Bad & Ugly

FIEC Leaders' Conf 2025 Blackpool

My longing: Communities of believers living for the praise and glory of Christ among people groups where there are currently none because our churches (from this room) send those who will be witnesses there are plant his church in these places!

Arrival: Discuss with the person next to you 'If you've been on a Short Term Mission Trip, why did you go? Was it worth it? If you never have, why not?'

11:50

Two years ago, we had the privilege of sending one of our young members as a long-term missionary to one of the least reach countries in the world. Last week some of us were on a zoom prayer meeting with her, other churches, 4 other workers in that country, hearing stories of people who've just been converted!

As I reflected on where all this began for her, STMT had a significant part to play along the way.

What I'm hoping you'll take away from this session:

- i. Motivated and enthused to have a go
- ii. Mindful of some pitfalls
- iii. Equipped with some principles & practical steps

(Singing... how God might use us... Each church the joy of *Acts 13:1-3 AND 14:26,27* STMT can play a part in this.)

I'm hoping that by the end you might consider...

1. Going yourself

There's nothing like going yourself to fire your heart with the need.

It was on a STMT to India that God moved by heart with the need AND the opportunity we share in this room.

Need: So many people **photo**... idols... Ganges... stepping over man in gutter.

Opportunity: There are some in that little flock back home that God may send. Everyone can be sending.

If you've been yourself – you'll probably have felt the same.

11:58

Getting back, I soon discovered...

2. The Blessing of Encouraging Individuals to experience something similar. One of our school teachers in the church in Lincoln responded to the encouragement, sought out an agency and was soon in Africa. Some years later she quit teaching in UK altogether and is now serving long term.

3. The wider impact of a group going together

Taking a group back to India had a massive impact on the church.

A first for me, quite scary. Arriving in Delhi, I'd forgotten what an assault on the senses... all looking to me. Internal flight to their new Ashram in Dehradun. Well outside my comfort zone. Then the H&S nightmare when I discovered my team helping improve the perimeter security of the compound with razor wire!

But – as we met over the months in prep. As we travelled, served, learnt and grew together – it changed every one of them. They shared so movingly at a feedback evening.

True impact – small groups, serving teams, friends and family. This opened the door to a deepening relationship with our brothers and sisters at DBI.

12:07

4. The Deeper Impact of Longer-Term Partnership

STMTs can lead to and then strengthen these partnerships with those serving effectively on the ground.

Over the following years the leaders of the ministry visited us. Others went out there. In the last 20 years I've had the privilege of witnessing the most incredible fruit amongst the unreached out there. From one centre, there are now 13. More than half of the pastor/trainers leading in these places are first generation converts. Currently they are facing increasing persecution. Recently targeted by a government investigation which uncovered 25,000 churches planted by past students! This has had such a profound impact on the church here too.

Over some years, God had been convincing me of the impact of partnerships like this. Supporting indigenous disciple making. In fact it was making me wonder whether the day of us prioritising sending was being overtaken by partnership. I also had another question. How could we be involved in this kind of partnership among the unreached in areas where there is no church nor believers nearby?

In fact, for a number of years I met with a friend who was a mobiliser with a mission agency. He wanted churches to see the need of UPGs. I said – ‘You’re pushing on an open door. We need to know how, and is there a way to do this in partnership?’ This went on for several years! Then, ‘out of the blue’ he asked if I’d meet with the directors of his mission agency. They wanted to try something they’d never done before!

Their current approach...

New approach – collaboration of agency and church pastors – from the beginning!

They’d identified an UPG. In a country in NW Africa they wanted us to call ‘Maureen’! 1st record of missionaries 1970s Very few converts in the whole country. One team had been for a vision/prayer visit. Would I commit to explore this and with the pastors from 3-4 others churches?

Oct 2022 we went. St Andrew’s Leyland, Charlotte Chapel, Great Vic Baptist, Belfast & All Souls. **photo**

What a place! Visa only possible on arrival. Interview – alone. Loads of questions!

Lots of time observing and praying. **Photo** Desert. Heat. Never seen a capital city like it.

Met a local family (not believers) **photo**, some of the small group of those committed and serving. A language school.

An African family committed who introduced us to just one convert from this people group. **Photo**

Penultimate evening we sat with one of the most experienced families there. We heard the history of God's working in this country...

Need vast. Current timing critical.

Final night – as leaders from the churches, with the Director of this agency we asked 'what might God have us do together?' Full hearts. Lots of excitement. But so many questions!! By the end, we committed to...

- a. Raise awareness of the need among this people group
- b. Seek to send people out here long term
- c. Explore this collaborative model with the aim of encouraging other churches and agencies to try the same with other UPGs

God had brought a revolution in my heart! Partnership yes. Sending still fundamental for our churches.

But – my faith was so weak. Could I envision anyone to come here?! How could I bring the church on-board? My fellow leaders?

12:17

In these last 3 years I've discovered...

5. The breathtaking impact of partnership that results in sending long-term labourers to unreached people groups

There were many steps. We've learnt a lot. Get in touch if you want to find out more about that. But. Under God, this young partnership now has 6 workers, two more planning to go next year. And one of them is one of our members. Her story alone is remarkable. Two more couples from LC have now been out there on subsequent trips and we're praying in earnest for the Lord to raise up more.

Let's just crystallise then the potential impact of STMTs

For those who go

- Faith deepened
 - outside comfort zone
 - seeing believers in other cultures
 - workers laying down their lives
- Enlarged heart – singing with a room full of new believers already giving up everything to plant churches **photo** – this also shows...
- Deepened understanding – the way the gospel impacts peoples lives and drives
- Greater confidence & passion to share the gospel and make disciples. I've now had the seen the impact in the lives of those 5 men I took to India in 2007
- Better informed – for praying and giving
- Better equipped – to advocate & mobilise

12:22

For those who receive

- Encouragement (sitting on a rooftop – never had a pastor visit – here were 5!)

- Raising awareness – help gain support
- Growing partnership

For those who send

- Enthuses the church
- Draws more into mission
- Sharpens understanding

Possible breakout: What's your experience? Have you witnessed any positive results of STMTs?

Potential Pitfalls

Darren Carlson, 'Why you should consider cancelling your short term mission trips.'
'I've seen with my own eyes... houses in Latin America painted 20 times by 20 different short-term teams; fake orphanages to get Westerners to give money; a New England-style church built by a Western team in Cameroon that is never used except when the team comes to visit... I have seen or known of teams of grandmothers who go to African countries and hold baby orphans for a week every year but don't send a [penny/dime] to help them otherwise... teams that lead evangelistic crusades claiming commitments to Christ topping 5,000 every year in the same location with the same people attending.'

12:26

6 common problems

i. Lack of Cultural Awareness

So much we don't understand. Without extreme care we can inadvertently cause great damage.

A trip in North India had a team were so desperate to be doing some evangelism – they'd gone into the town centre and started handing out tracts. Risked undermining the whole work!

An enthusiastic friend in a taxi had been sharing the gospel in an Islamic republic in North Africa. Thankfully nothing was said about the local believers and converts. They found out later in the conversation that he had a senior role in the police!

I was talking to a friend who'd serve in Moz about the approach of an organisation. As I explained his face crumpled... Choosing one church?! Let me tell you...

ii. Money

Some stats from...

‘Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)’ Robert L Lupton

\$1 trillion benevolent aid to Africa in last 50y. Income lower per head, life expectancy unchanged, adult literacy lower.

85% of aid to African countries never reaches target area

Money spent by one student ministry to cover their Central American trips to repaint an orphanage would have paid for 2 local painters, 2 full time teachers and new uniforms for all

Did you see slumdog millionaire? Why are children being deliberately maimed in Indian cities? Because foreign visitors will give generously!

On one short term trip to Asia one team member connected directly with a regional leader. Money caused him to break, form his own ‘rival’ work, with the direct support of that visitor. Ultimately he left the country to live and study in the west!

12:31

iii. Dependency

Where our visits create a long-term need we imperil the work and disincentivise initiative on the ground.

iv. Power Imbalance

Leaders in host nations may feel a genuine deference to those in the West. If they say they’re coming to help, it’s very hard to refuse. They then have to scramble to create something for the visiting team to do, in order to impress and make it ‘meaningful’.

v. Distraction For The Hosts

Local ministries and long-term missionaries can be disproportionately distracted by the arrival of short-term teams.

Imagine you’re contacted by a team from Poland. They want to visit and run a holiday bible club (which you’re been doing successfully for years!) They’ll do it in Polish so need you to provide translation. They’ll send 12 but only 2 speak English. They are quite happy to stay anywhere but will need you to accommodate them for the fortnight. They just need food, a place to sleep and shower facilities. You’d need to accept that half of the team for half of the time may well be taken up with resolving tensions between them. Some are

quite likely to be unwell. Yes please, they'd love to do some sightseeing too.

Reading correspondence from one long term missionary: hosting these trips can be exhausting, discouraging and provide little insight into what life for them is really like.

vi. Effective?

Many aren't. Most *do* return with amazing stories but some stats tell a different story. There's research that suggests STMTs...

- don't change participants' lives (long term)
- don't generate more long-term missionaries
- often harm local economies and orphans

In my experience, and many others. This is a generalisation, reflecting the prevalence of unhelpful approaches. Those positive reasons still stand. But surely this impresses us with the need for great wisdom and humble caution.

12:36

Principles & Priorities

Prioritise...

- i. investment in longer-term workers
- ii. collaboration with those in the host area working in long-term projects (indigenous or cross-cultural missionaries) After partnering for many years, a team of us were invited to join the Indian leadership to work on a 20yr vision!
- iii. partnership – connect your trips with the development of long-term partnerships

- iv. Romania connecting with ongoing outreach to children – in the end church teams went yearly sending your best – those with most experience, godly & skilled (Acts 13 – not a STMT but the principle clear – they were prepared to send their best despite the cost)
- v. development over relief

Consider...

- i. connecting trips with mission at home (cross cultural outreach, using the same skills for disciple making, evangelism...) A Cameroonian student joined us for a couple of years, through this connection a group joined a mission he was organising back home. Some before and after involved in street evangelism here
- ii. when sending young people, partner them with the most experience, in the field or on the team
- iii. If you're sending people to hold babies, play with kids or do building projects, there are probably better ways to help them.

See: 'The Seven Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission', Mission Excellence

12:41

Practical Steps

1. Begin where God has put you and those he's entrusted to you. Who's keen. What gifts and experience. What connections do you have already. We started with our current partners.
2. Discern your current priorities in mission You can't do everything.

3. Clarify your reasons for doing STMTs. For us...
 - a. Strengthen our long-term partnerships
 - b. Encourage/support the care of our partners (that rooftop experience never left me)
 - c. Raising up long-term labourers
 - d. Drawing every member and ministry into prayer, partnership and participation in mission
4. Gather those beginning to consider God's call (Mission Explored group)
5. If you haven't been, go! (Cast a vision among your leaders)

Any questions?

Looking ahead, my great longing, that the Lord will give all our churches that Acts 13-14 privilege.

Heading in that direction starts with one step.

Reflect

What opportunities is God already giving them?

What might be the best next step?