

TO GO OR NOT TO GO:
FAITHFUL PRESENCE IN SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

By Zachariah C. Ellis

I. Introduction

In the burgeoning literature on short-term missions (STM), there is considerable discussion of its benefits and pitfalls. The most popular arguments by advocates demonstrate how STM can transform the lives of participants - both guests and hosts. It opens the eyes of participants by providing the opportunity for them to experience a new lifestyle and culture. STM also provides a place for people to see what God is doing around the world, which gives participants the chance to understand God better. Finally, STM can bring resources from a materially rich area to a materially poor area. Those with resources desire to both spread their wealth and see where the funds are going. STM allows opportunities for this.

All of these are legitimate. Yet, many other scholars argue that none of these is enough to justify the cost and potential harm that STM brings with it. First, they are very expensive. Kurt Ver Beek tells about an STM trip taken to Honduras after Hurricane Mitch. The total price for the team to go and build one house was \$30,000. For the same price, Honduran locals could have built fifteen houses and received a paycheck to feed their families.¹ This does not appear to be a wise use of resources. Second, STM invites paternalism and dependency to take root. When materially rich groups routinely visit a materially poor community, it is natural for the former to desire to give and “help out” the latter. Yet over time this often leads to the perfectly capable poorer community counting on outsiders to come in and bring money with them.² Third, they often support prejudices brought with participants because the short trips usually provide too little time to process. David Livermore tells a story about one man who was convinced that they could not fly planes in India during the rain. Because of his brief experience with two cancelled flights during rain, this twenty-two-year-old assumed India did not have the technology to fly planes during the rain. He came in with a stereotype of India and molded his experiences to support that stereotype.³

Yet, this author would question whether effectiveness is the best way to measure STM. Whether to participate in STM is not a question of effectiveness but of faithfulness. It is at this point that James Davison Hunter’s theology of faithful presence will further the conversation.

In *To Change the World*, Hunter argues that the key to cultural change is maintaining a faithful presence in the social and physical location that you occupy. Everybody, regardless of socioeconomic status or social capital, or even of mental capacity or physical ability, has the

¹ Kurt Alan Ver Beek. “Lessons from the Sapling: Review of Quantitative Research on Short-Term Missions,” 475-504 in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right*. Ed. By Robert Priest. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008.

² Kyeong Sook Park. “Researching STM and Paternalism,” in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right*. Ed. By Robert Priest. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008. Park demonstrates the danger of paternalism in STM while presenting some important ways to reduce paternalistic tendencies.

³ David A. Livermore. *Serving With Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006, 2013, 67.

ability to excel where you are. Those individuals and institutions closer to the center of culture have more ability to change culture, but Christianity needs people at every level of society who can be faithfully present in demonstrating an alternative way of life. “The practice of faithful presence, then, generates relationship and institutions that are fundamentally covenantal in character, the ends of which are the fostering of meaning, purpose, truth, beauty, belonging, and fairness. - not just for Christians, but for everyone.”⁴ Faithful presence requires commitment and its end is to honor the Creator rather than to manipulate creation. The goal is faithfulness rather than efficiency.

Hunter’s focus is rightly on “being fully present and committed” in one’s spheres of social influence.⁵ This is where one has the most influence and where one can be most faithful - in the day-to-day routine of life. One must first demonstrate an alternate way of life to those whom one encounters regularly. This is the foundation of cultural change and of being faithfully present. However, it is helpful to take Hunter’s key concept and structure and see what it has to say to those traveling outside one’s direct sphere of influence. Can one maintain faithful presence with someone in another country? Does STM help develop faithful presence? Can a group of North Americans visit a vastly different setting and demonstrate an alternative way of life, the way of *shalom*, to that community?

This paper will adapt Hunter’s thesis of faithful presence to argue for the critical role short-term missions plays in encouraging faithfulness in Christians. STM allows Christians to engage in faithful presence in another culture which allows both the guest and host to grow in faithfulness, to support the other as they strive to be faithfully present in their own place, and to encourage the other as they affirm and resist culture.

II. Biblical and Theological Foundation for Faithful Presence

The concept of faithful presence begins with who God is. God is faithfully present in this world, covenanting with us, the other, even when we reject that covenant. At the beginning of creation, the Spirit was “hovering over the face of the water” (Gen 1:2, ESV). Later, God is discovered “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (3:8). From the very beginning, God was present with creation. These simple actions are often passed over, yet they reveal an important truth about God: God is present and committed to creation. Even after “the wickedness of man [became] great in the earth” (6:5), God remained committed to God’s creation and covenanted with “every living creature” (9:12). God committed to being faithfully present in creation even after creation rejected God.

Over the course of time, God chose to covenant with a specific people through whom all the world would know God. And, over the course of time, Israel, the elected people through whom God chose to be faithfully present in the world, rejected God. The prophets of God proclaimed a time when they would realize their apostasy and return to worshipping God alone. God not only chose to covenant with this idolatrous people, God chose to pursue them as a man pursues his lover: “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress,

⁴ James Davison Hunter. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York: Oxford, 2010, 263.

⁵ Hunter, 247.

even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins” (Hosea 3:31). God pursues us at great cost to God.

It is in this pursuit that the God of the universe became a human, even a slave, in the person of Jesus. Matthew calls him Immanuel, God With Us. The Incarnation was not something new, something either against or in addition to who God had already revealed God to be. The name Immanuel was first prophesied by Isaiah concerning a sign for Ahaz. Matthew reused this prophecy to show that the person of Jesus was a continuation of God’s plan to reconcile Israel to God’s self. In other words, the Incarnation was something that flowed out of God’s very essence.⁶ This is understood when placed with the works of God in the primeval narrative, as discussed, as well as God’s constant pursuit of all humanity. The Incarnation demonstrates God’s reckless love and relentless desire to know us and to be faithfully present with us as we journey through creation.

The Incarnation also demonstrates God’s unwavering commitment to humanity. This was an act that changed everything - the ultimate revelation of God. Once God entered this world in the form of a human, there is no taking it back. This commitment flows out of who God is, yet demonstrates in a new way how serious God is. While Jesus only ministered for three years, the person of Jesus is forever embedded in our history. The Word that was “In the beginning” (John 1:1), is that same Word that “became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). This forever reveals God’s character as totally and essentially committed to us, the other. God covenanted with humanity to forever pursue us into a loving, committed relationship with God’s very self. Ultimately, this unwavering commitment culminates in the death of God with the result that God’s character is forever known as cruciform.

A theology of faithful presence begins with God and extends to God’s Church. Paul urges the community in Philippi to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5, NRSV). Just as Jesus humbled himself and poured himself out for the other, so also we are to humbly pour ourselves out for the other. Just as Jesus existed entirely for the other, entirely in obedience to God, so also are we to live for God and other. Thus we can take the logical step from understanding how God is faithfully present with creation, constantly wooing humanity, to understanding how we are called to participate in God’s story by being faithfully present, constantly reaching out to the other, and inviting them into the Church.

We would be mistaken if we believed that God calls us to mere imitation. Living “just as” Jesus did is only a shallow way of understanding discipleship. We have the awesome opportunity to participate in the story of God, most fully demonstrated in the person of Jesus. Participating is more than imitating; it is incorporation into the person of Christ, into the body of Christ. Participation implies faithful agency. God has used faithful humans to demonstrate God’s faithful presence throughout history. A brief overview of this in the Old Testament is found in Hebrews 11. There, the author lists several people who participated in this story and were faithfully present to both those with whom they were most familiar as well as to complete strangers. Participation in the story of God involves demonstrating God’s faithfulness to those with whom one is close geographically as well as to those in a different place.

⁶ See Michael J. Gorman. *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009.

Paul's profound and timeless metaphor of the Church-as-Body eloquently expresses this understanding of participation in Christ. Christ is the head of the Body, into whom "we must grow up in every way" (Eph 4:15). It is the head that "causes the growth of the body... in love" (4:16). The rest of the body responds to the head's movements, decisions, and thoughts. Participation from every body part is vital to complete the mission of the head. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it." But, "if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:26). Every member of the Body participates in what God is doing in this world. Thus, every member of the body joins with God in practicing faithful presence in creation.

Interestingly enough, it is the author of Hebrews that adds perhaps the most important piece to this metaphor. In his letters, Paul insists that everybody in the body suffers and rejoices together. The author of Hebrews goes even further. After discussing the incredible faithfulness of several God-fearers who participated in the story of God, Hebrews 11:40 declares that they only received part of the promise and will not be made complete without us. In other words, they need us to participate in God's story in order for the promise of God to be fulfilled. This implies that we need others as well and cannot do it on our own. It is not only that we are all affected by the other members of the body; we cannot be complete without these members.

Understanding faithful presence is incredibly important in the STM discussion. To restate where we have been: first, God is committed to practicing faithful presence in creation, which means God is faithfully present with us, a radical other. Second, we the Church are called to participate in this as God pulls creation to God's self, wooing humanity into a covenant-relationship with God. Third, without the entire body of Christ, including those who have gone before, are present here and now, and will come after, the Church is less faithful in its participation in the story of God. This brings us to STM and why a theology of faithful presence must be brought into the conversation.

III. Faithful Presence and Short-Term Missions

If you ask people why they go on an STM trip, you will get a myriad of answers: get out of one's comfort zone, learn and unlearn habits, discover how the majority world lives, to serve others, because God wants us to, to have fun, to learn to "count our blessings."⁷ None of these are wrong in and of themselves, but rather incomplete. The most important goal for STM trips, many missiologists argue, is to support and further the long-term strategy of the hosts as they strive to be faithful.⁸ Sometimes this will involve building; other times direct evangelism; still other times running a kids camp. However, it should always involve partnership, learning, and building relationships. It will always involve existing for the other with the end result that the other grows in faithfulness - and most likely both "others" growing in faithfulness. This is why STM has such an important role to play in Christianity today.

⁷ Several of these come from Don C. Richter. *Mission Trips that Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World*. Nashville: The Upper Room, 2008, p. 29.

⁸ See Alex G. Smith. "Evaluating Short-Term Missions: Missiological Questions," and Miriam Adeney, "The Myth of the Blank Slate: A Check List for Short-Term Missions," in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right!* Ed. By Robert J. Priest, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008. And Charles A. Cook, "Towards a Missiologically and Morally Responsible Short-Term Ministry: Lessons Learned in the Development of Church Partnership Evangelism." *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2:2 (2007): 48-68.

First, STM encourages growth in faithfulness for both the host and the guest. For the host, many unique opportunities are available as one community welcomes a much different community into their home. Hospitality is an important practice that is often stretched during STM trips. Receiving others gives one the opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ and participate in God's mission of welcoming the stranger. It is also a great way to practice hospitality before welcoming those who don't know the love of God into one's home. Furthermore, it is important that even those who do not have many material resources to offer still be given the chance to demonstrate hospitality and practice living out the Gospel. Don Richter shares how important it is to his sister with Down's Syndrome to give presents to her family. Even though she has little to give, it is important that they receive what she offers.⁹ Many STM trips involve the majority world and locations of extreme poverty. Encountering the other through STM trips allows those who have little chance to travel and encounter foreign cultures to still practice faithfulness by practicing hospitality as well as the call to pour one's self out for the other.

For the guest, they are given the chance to participate in God's mission to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. Most STM teams visit places where the Church is already established, and all teams visit places where God is already at work. However, many host communities mention the different relationships that open up when foreigners come and visit. Robert Priest tells how a "gringo" accompanying a Peruvian evangelical pastor can open many doors, literally, that would otherwise remain shut. After teams leave, those relationships are continued and have the potential to develop into important "linking social capital."¹⁰ In addition to proclaiming the Gospel to the nations, STM allows guests to join with what God is doing in another context and be faithful to God's mission to redeem the entire world. Micah 6:8 calls Christians to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly before God" (Micah 6:8). While it is important for Christians to practice this locally, the Church must not limit itself to only participating in God's mission in one's home, but rather what God is doing in all the nations.

Second, STM allows both hosts and guests to learn how to be more faithfully present in each communities' home culture. According to the author of Hebrews, both need the other to be "complete." For hosts, guests bring new ideas and a fresh way of looking at things. This is important for technical skills, of course, but it is also vital for learning how to be faithfully present. The guests can teach the hosts skills to better excel in producing good and beautiful things. They can identify areas where the Christian community is largely absent, recognize potential redemptive relationships, and demonstrate what faithful presence looks like in their home culture. Key to faithful presence is commitment. Practicing commitment to Christians in a radically different context, perhaps even another continent, allows the host to better practice commitment to non-Christians in their backyard. As they form friendships, work out differences, and tell their story, they are able to practice communicating their values and vision for the future and practice living for the other as they participate in the story of God.

In turn, STM allows guests to learn from their hosts how to be more faithfully present in their home culture. Richard Slimbach outlines many ways Christians can be faithful travelers -

⁹ Richter, 87. This is not to compare those with Down's Syndrome to STM hosts.

¹⁰ Robert Priest, "Short Term Missions as a New Paradigm of Mission." Forthcoming in *After Christendom*, Westminster: John Knox Press, 8.

travelers who spread *shalom* wherever they go, who live into economic practices of the kingdom of God as they spend money, and who proclaim the Gospel with action and word as they interact with locals and other travelers.¹¹ As STM teams learn how to be “mindful missionaries” (what Slimback calls STM travelers), they also learn how to spread *shalom*, participate in kingdom economics, and proclaim the Gospel in their own culture - in other words, be faithfully present. Traveling, especially intentional travel for the other (STM), allows a community to intentionally practice faithful presence. The different setting ensures a greater amount of thought about processes and method. Furthermore, a good STM host offers suggestions and criticisms to the guests as they practice. Being a “mindful missionary” offers the grounds to be more faithfully present in one’s own culture.

Finally, STM encourages the other as they affirm and resist culture. Hunter asserts that Christians must both affirm and resist culture if we are to be faithfully present in culture. Affirmation always comes first, for the world was good from the very beginning. Then a “community of resistance” is developed that critiques culture and embodies a new ethos.¹² STM allows both hosts and guests to demonstrate to the other what is very much worthy of affirmation as well as what is deserving of resistance in their culture. Revealing one’s culture to the other allows the opportunity to critique one’s own culture and invites criticism from someone with a different perspective. Furthermore, visiting STM teams provide an impetus for hosts to examine what they are doing, look at it with a new lens, and learn how to be more faithfully present in the place where God has placed them.

Likewise, STM allows hosts to encourage the guests as they affirm and resist their own home culture. Murray Decker shows how “sojourner adjustment” (i.e. culture shock) brings about dissonance between one’s home culture and what one experiences when encountering a new culture. One’s cultural assumptions are challenged in this process of “orientation, disorientation, and reorientation,” allowing one to better analyze how one’s culture functions.¹³ The more one learns about other cultures, the more equipped one is able to critique one’s own culture. This applies to surface level skills and abilities - painting, building, teaching, etc. - but it goes deeper to cultural processes and values. Brian Howell encourages STM trips to view as valuable not only the time *accomplishing* as part of the mission of the trip, but also “any time spent listening to local leaders or visiting with villagers... visiting a beach, touring a museum or even shopping.”¹⁴ All aspects of the trip give the guests a better viewpoint of their home culture. In this “glocal” world, being faithfully present in one’s local context allows one to be more

¹¹ Richard Slimbach. “The Mindful Missioner” in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right!* Ed. By Robert J. Priest, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008.

¹² Hunter, 235.

¹³ Murray S. Decker. “Student Sojourners and Spiritual Formation: Understanding the Intersection of Cross-Cultural Adjustment and Spiritual Disorientation” in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right!* Ed. By Robert J. Priest, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008, 567.

¹⁴ Brian Howell. *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012, 2012.

faithfully present in the global context; being faithfully present in a global context allows one to be more faithfully present in one's local context.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, STM nurtures faithfulness in both the host and the guest. The question still remains though if the good that is done outweighs all the bad and possible risk that comes with STM. However, this becomes an irrelevant question when considering a theology of faithful presence. The question becomes, how are we faithful to who God is, and who we are, as we travel and encounter the other? We must be "mindful missionaries". We must be aware of how we are spending our money and treating locals, and why we are participating. Not everybody is going to be able to travel to another country to grow in faithfulness, but some will. They are charged with sharing with their community what they have learned. And those who can't travel to another country might be able to travel to another region. And if that is out of the question, then perhaps they can encounter the other in their own region, their own city. And if even this is impossible, Hebrews 11 reminds us that we help to complete each other. Those who are able must encourage those who are not in their faithful presence. We must go. We must continue to encounter, to encourage, and to live for the other. James Davison Hunter's theology of faithful presence demonstrates both the reason for STM and the way to practice STM.

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¹⁵ Rolando W. Cuellar. "Short-Term Missions Are Bigger Than You Think: Missiological Implications for the Glocal Church." in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right!* Ed. By Robert J. Priest, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008, 283.

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