



(from left) A Congolese guide, Bertha Lloyd, Leona Edler, Aaron Sims in Western Uganda, 1996

RECONCILIATION REPORT

When Helping Helps!

Since perhaps 2 million American Christians go on short-term mission trips (STMs) annually, are these trips worth the huge investment? Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett wrote the popular book *When Helping Hurts*¹. They provide generally lucid, balanced, wise and detailed guidance for serving the materially poor. Chapter 7, “Doing Short-term Missions

Without Doing Long-term Harm” is highly critical of most STMs. Their essential objections are that STM members generally serve in ignorance—of local culture and of best practices and attitudes of asset-based development, and that they generally waste financial resources that should go into more effective long-term mission/development. One missiologist concluded that STMs “represent cheap education, but expensive mission.”² Robert Priest noted of STMs, “...it is a populist phenomenon almost completely divorced from scholarship, from missiology, and from seminary education.”³ I’ve led about twenty short-term ministry teams and respond to the objections raised by Fikkert and Corbett, both of whom I know personally to some degree and hold in esteem.

Their premise seems to be that STMs should be doing development work (creating new community assets), not relief work (meeting immediate need). Because they advocate asset-based development and participatory development—requiring a knowledge of local people, networks, customs, and other assets (and that nationals take the lead)—they argue that a two-week mission trip is simply inadequate. Such knowledge and network of relationships require far longer periods of time to acquire. They caricature STMs as serving the materially poor in a Western time template: projects over people, rushing to paint the final coat before catching the flight home. Instead they advocate, among other guidelines, going to learn about the people and not coming across as “gods,” to the detriment of all concerned.

I also have difficulty with certain kinds of STMs. These generally go to observe or consume, instead of going to serve. Several years ago a large church sent a contingent to Africa to see their pastor “preach to the masses,” while also attending seminars, staying in 4-5 star hotels and floating in hot air balloons. If evaluating a ministry for support, it’s appropriate to observe. Further, only 3.5% of STMs go to World A (the un-evangelized), 12.5% to World B (evangelized, but non-Christian), while 84% go to World C (already Christian). Indeed, the highest ratios of STM participants-to-population are in the Bahamas and Belize⁴.

Let’s dispense with the two-week STM parody. We may be on the ground for that length of time, but months of negotiations often go into trip planning. When helping with development (initiating schools, orphanages, churches, seminaries) we negotiate with nationals, asking them to identify their perceived needs and then to prioritize them. We locate mutual priorities. We consider costs and what nationals can do toward their projects. We generally help to get an agreed-upon project started and do not fund maintenance of the projects, such as schools and orphanages. RMNI has often partnered with Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church (LMPC), Chattanooga, Tenn., to fund projects. We partnered together with an American missionary to fund and oversee a corn grinding mill in a Sudanese refugee settlement in Uganda. LMPC purchased land for the new 16-acre seminary campus of Westminster Theological Seminary in Kampala, Uganda and funded two of their new dormitories, as well as scholarships for students and faculty salary supplements. LMPC funded orphanage buildings in Lohutok, South Sudan, a church and primary school near Kampala, as well as a Christian high school in Kampala, and training by nationals of Southern Sudanese church planters, etc. All these were based upon STM visits of 2-4 weeks in length, in partnership with nationals who set the agenda and who normally oversaw the projects.

Dorm construction, Westminster theological Seminary



However, why should development be considered the priority for STMs, as assumed in this chapter? In earlier chapters Fikkert acknowledges that the key to poverty alleviation is being transformed by Christ⁵. He also cites Luke 4:43, where Jesus decides not to set up a medical clinic in favor of preaching the Gospel in other towns, indicating that, at bottom, the salvation of souls has more enduring value than physical healing⁶. Fikkert affirms cross-cultural evangelism and teaching⁷. Aaron Sims is a gifted evangelist who served on four STMs in Uganda. Over 3,000 people professed Christ during those weeks of crusades and personal evangelism. For perspective on the high cost of STMs, the World Christian Database says that in 2005 \$6,677 was invested, on average, for each baptism in Uganda. Presumably at least some of the 3,000 were baptized, since we operated from the base of local churches. In March 2010 our South Sudan team saw at least 42 professions of faith in some highly unusual circumstances, working under local church planters. In 2005 the average cost per baptism in Sudan was \$20,080⁸.

Regarding the clash of worldviews described in chapter 7, it's good for Western and African or Indian worldviews to interact—sometimes clashing is inevitable. Learning will occur. Our teams are generally about five in number—we probably don't intimidate the locals. To prepare team members, each is required to read *Ministering Cross-culturally*⁹. Current articles and websites about the country are provided, and in-country coaching is given as we navigate the culture. We debrief daily on the field¹⁰. With so much information available on the Internet, much can be learned of the host country or tribe before arrival. Before meeting the Lopit tribe in South Sudan, an ethnography of a near-cousin tribe (having 80% linguistic compatibility) was obtained via Amazon.com. The resident foreign missionaries were skeptical that such a study existed, but it was left with them. After five years, I'm still being thanked for that ethnography. It's been used in some of our seminars to confront the worldview of Lopit men who continued to offer sacrifices to the river god, and to praise the tribal safety net that supports marriages in crisis.

The authors of *When Helping Hurts* counseled STM recruiters, "Stay away from the 'go help and save them' message"¹¹. Of course only Christ can save spiritually, and ultimately we can't fix people (Acts 4:12). The connotation is that it is paternalistic to be motivated to go and help someone else. Is this pushing the community development ethos to an extreme--Stay away, you might do harm--don't try this away from home, but send money? Corbett prefers money to STMs, unless he could be sure long range relationships would be established—but short-termers are highly unlikely to commit to multiple trips at a point in time¹². Christ didn't give us the luxury of doing mission by paying someone else to minister to people. Rather, He told us to go to the uttermost parts of the earth. The writer of Hebrews commended Christians for helping other Christians (Heb. 6:10). Paul demonstrated the need to help the weak (Acts 20:34-35). We look at the Body of Christ analogy of Eph. 4:16 and 1 Cor. 12 perhaps too narrowly when we think simply of serving one another in a local congregation. What if one part of the international Body of Christ, with a particular expertise, wants to serve (not dominate) another part of the Body with another expertise? Is the Christian with the gift of helps, for example, consigned to staying home? Or, despite Matt. 28:18-20, should I not teach in other cultures so that I won't be perceived as presumptuous?

The authors maintain that STMs apparently don't result in more missionaries on the field or more money being given for missions. Globally, the number of foreign missionaries has fallen from around 420,000 in mid-2000 to around 400,000 in mid-2010, and the number falling by .5% per year¹³. The trend is global, perhaps reflecting the growth of national churches where missionaries are likely to go—to majority-Christian nations. Randall Friesen studied 116 people of Anabaptist background engaged in STM, who served from one month to one year. His research showed a "very strong" correlation between repeated STMs and the likelihood of returning to the mission field¹⁴. Priest's research "either supports or is compatible with the widely accepted claim that STM participation increases interest in career missionary service."¹⁵ Ellen Fox went three times with us to South Sudan. This year, newly retired, she traveled one way with us and is now living in a remote village with the people she came to love. Latin America Mission surveyed 112 of its own missionaries, and of these 64% said that they were involved in missions today as a result of a STM experience¹⁶.

Regarding giving to foreign missions, very little seems to be effective, with giving to global foreign missions being approximately one-tenth of one percent of all giving to Christian causes. This percentage is virtually unchanged from 2000 to 2010¹⁷. Priest's research concluded that STM involvement does not increase giving to career missions, supporting Fikkert and Corbett. He suggests that perhaps while STMs increase interest in career missions, low giving to career missions prohibits the support of more missionaries¹⁸.

Money raised from within the black community for STMs with our ministry would not have been given to global missions otherwise, so it was "new money" to missions. Of those who have had to cancel their trip with us, all wanted a refund—so it's also non-transferable money. The experience of an RN led the tiny African American church to which she belongs to give \$18,000 to medical missions in Kenya. The ten STM trips of Bertha Lloyd was one of two factors in turning a traditional Black "Missionary Baptist" church into the reality, focusing upon global missions, taking teams to Haiti, hosting five annual missions conferences to date, and having instituted a faith promise giving plan for missions-- "new money." Liberal giving is a grace given by God (2 Cor. 8:1-9). Such grace may only come by a spiritual revival, in a culture too often focused upon acquisition, comfort and pleasure.

Studies show that frequency of STMs and careful teaching during and following the STM experience enhance positive spiritual and attitudinal change¹⁹. Research also shows that multi-ethnic trips such as those RMNI conducts result in significantly more interethnic relationships back home²⁰. It is "cheap education," particularly in the African American community, where global missions is largely a non-issue. In sum, STMs exercising the spiritual and professional gifts of the team, with a servant's spirit, can help²¹.

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Teaching in S. Sudan, 2010

¹ Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor and yourself*, 2009, ISBN: 9780802457059.

² Ralph Winter, "Maximum Impact Short-term Mission," *Mission Frontiers*, 3/1/2004 (26:2), pp. 11-13.

³ Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, Steve Rasmussen, C.M. Brown, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology: An International Review*, 34:4, October 2006, p. 434

⁴ Robert J. Priest and Joseph Paul Priest, "They See Everything and Understand Nothing: Short-term mission and service learning," *Missiology: An International Review*, 36:1, January 2008, p. 65. This figure summarizes 5270 surveys from college and seminary students.

⁵ Fikkert, pp. 80-81 ⁶ Fikkert, p. 32. ⁷ Fikkert, p. 96. ⁸ I don't know yet how many of these followed through with baptism.

⁹ Marvin K. Mayers and Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Ministering Cross-culturally: An incarnational model for personal relationships*, ISBN: 9780801026478.

¹⁰ I generally do not debrief after returning to the USA and need to improve in this area, as teams are scattered geographically. A feedback survey from new team members is requested.

¹¹ Fikkert, p. 177. ¹² Fikkert, p. 171.

¹³ David Barrett, Todd Johnson & Peter Crossing, "Status of Global Mission, 2010, in Context of 20th and 21st Centuries," *Int'l Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan. 2010, p. 36.

¹⁴ Randall Gary Friesen, "The long-term impact of short-term missions on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of young adults," 2004, dissertation, p. 224. <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/1890>

¹⁵ Priest, Dischinger, pp. 435, 437. ¹⁶ "Short-Term Missions: Is It Worth It?" www.lam.org/news/article.php?id=109

¹⁷ Barrett, p. 36. ¹⁸ Priest, Dischinger, pp. 435, 440.

¹⁹ Friesen, pp. 218, 220-21, 227; cf. Priest and Priest, p. 71. However, Friesen notes that many of the 116 participants in his STM study actually regressed in their spiritual lives after returning home, away from the ST team disciplines, necessitating post-trip follow-up by family, church, etc. Friesen, 224-26, 232. The US Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission answer at least some of the concerns raised by Fikkert and Corbett <http://www.stmstandards.org/standards/>

²⁰ Priest, Dischinger, p. 445; Friesen, p. 228-29.

²¹ One does not have to have a PhD in missions to design and lead STMs. Excellent resources are available. See, for example, <http://missionbooks.org/williamcareylibrary/home.php?cat=20>