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## CHAPTER 1

### MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

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## UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS AND STMs

**T**hey stream through the airport, backpacks and matching shirts bobbing through security lines, and then sleepily relax at the gates. They pile into vans, pillows and trail mix crammed between every seat. There were 120,000 in 1989; 450,000 in 1998; 1,000,000 in 2003; and 2,200,000 in 2006. The numbers reflect a tidal wave of American short-term “missionaries” flooding the world.<sup>1</sup>

And the movement continues to grow.<sup>2</sup> Research from 2010 suggests that the number of people from the US traveling on international STMs each year has likely risen to 2–3 million.<sup>3</sup> To look at it from a different angle, Robert Wuthnow, professor of sociology at Princeton University, estimates that the likelihood of any given US church member going on an international STM sometime in their lifetime could be as high as 20–25 percent.<sup>4</sup>

But STMs as we think of them today are a recent phenomenon. Sixty years ago, traveling from Iowa to Kenya required an enormous financial and time investment. Now, high school students from Seattle

can afford a plane ticket to visit South Africa for two weeks—and they can make the trip year after year, easily raising funds each summer.

*This is a gift.* The world has shrunk remarkably in the space of a few decades, creating new opportunities to engage with the body of Christ and see the work God is doing through His people. The apostle Paul spent his life sailing around the Mediterranean world visiting churches, often arriving shipwrecked, waterlogged, or snakebitten. Now we can hop on an Airbus and arrive halfway across the world ten hours later, rarely experiencing anything worse than a bit of turbulence and jetlag. Early believers, or even the missionaries of 150 years ago, could never have dreamed of such an opportunity.

But the rise of STMs has left church leaders, missionaries, and organizations on both the sending and receiving side of the STM equation asking important questions: How well are we stewarding this opportunity and the resources God has entrusted to us? How do we do STMs well? What are the potential positive and negative effects of STMs? How can we shepherd participants in meaningful transformation and learning through these trips? How can we ensure our STMs are not harming the materially poor? These are weighty questions, and they require honest reflection by church leaders and congregation members.

It is exciting to see churches wrestling with the place of short-term missions in the life of the body of Christ. But this conversation has a context. How STMs began and how they became known as “missions” should inform where we go from here.

### **NOT MERELY SEMANTICS<sup>5</sup>**

At the end of the nineteenth century, the word “missionary” described someone who packed up a few meager belongings, sometimes in the coffin they planned to be buried in, and permanently said goodbye to their families. They then sailed for an unknown region of the world, spending their lives sharing the gospel with people who had never heard of Jesus Christ. Of course, the missionary movement was not perfect. “Conversion” to Christianity was sometimes associated with

political and cultural domination, not just proclaiming the gospel and partaking in equal fellowship in the body of Christ. But one thing was certain: being a missionary meant sacrifice. And it meant long-term permanent commitment. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the idea of a short-term presence on the mission field grew in popularity, largely thanks to the development of cheaper and faster travel. And even then, short-term work typically lasted several months and was seen primarily as an opportunity to recruit lifelong missionaries. These short-term experiences were not frequently labeled as “mission,” a word reserved for long-term work.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, more and more people, including students and youth who had no direct interest in becoming long-term workers, began taking short-term trips. As a result, trips were increasingly framed as opportunities for personal growth in addition to local service and impact.<sup>6</sup> The label of “missionary” was gradually applied to short-term participants, in spite of this heavy emphasis on personal transformation. But even in the early 1990s, there were still many theologians and missionaries who were uncomfortable using the same word, “mission,” to describe both a two-week trip and a twenty-year commitment.

Nonetheless, by the start of the twenty-first century, the phrase “short-term mission trip” was cemented in the popular vocabulary of many evangelical churches. However, the typical structure and purpose of these trips is still shifting. Between language barriers and cultural differences, many churches are realizing that STMs are not always conducive to evangelism and discipleship efforts. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of STMs focused specifically on poverty alleviation—an endeavor that seems manageable and concrete in the space of the typical two-week trip.<sup>7</sup>

Many churches are not even aware that the rise of short-term trips as mission was a controversial process, or that the definition of STM is constantly evolving. But this nuanced history should inform the way we use the word “mission” today. We need to use it carefully, for when we speak it we are invoking nothing less than God’s purposes and His

work in the world—not simply a brand of program or service project to be constantly adapted to the latest trends. How does the work of our short-term teams fit into God's overarching mission? Are our current trips self-consciously and introspectively submitting to His goals, not just in theory and language, but in practice?

### **THE MISSION OF GOD**

Answering these questions requires us to step back and ask, "What exactly is God's mission in the world?" Christians often answer this question in slightly different ways. Some say that God's mission is to glorify Himself. Others say it is to save people from their sins. Still others say it is to serve the poor and oppressed.

This guide is not intended to be a missiological treatise. But for the sake of clarity, we will talk about the mission of God in the terms of Colossians 1: God is reconciling all things to Himself through the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

—COLOSSIANS 1:13–20

God created the universe and called it "good," but sin marred His original design. Rather than leaving the creation to ruin, Colossians 1 teaches that God's mission is to reconcile all things, meaning that He

is restoring His creation to the fullness of what He intended it to be. This restoration is comprehensive in scope, transforming individuals, communities, nature, cultures, institutions, and systems. It all matters, because Christ is the creator, sustainer, and reconciler of all of it.

However, the full benefits of this restoration are only for those who repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice, while judgment awaits those who do not. These truths should give us incredible passion to communicate—in both words and deeds—the gospel in all its fullness, for God’s mission is truly good news for those who believe. (See chapters 1 and 2 of *When Helping Hurts* for a review of these themes.)

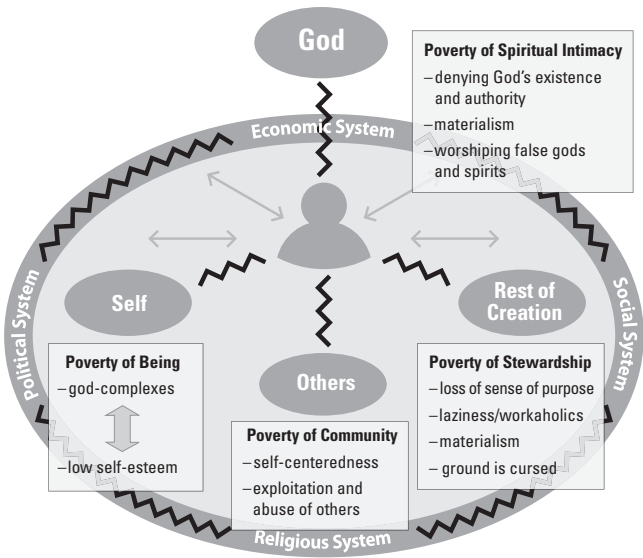
## **UNDERSTANDING POVERTY**

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God shows a particular concern that His mission of comprehensive reconciliation touch the lives of materially poor people in ways that restore them to all that it means to be image-bearers. Among other things, this means restoring poor people to being able to work and to support themselves and their families through that work. This is more easily said than done, for the root causes of poverty are difficult to diagnose and treat.

Many churches and short-term trips that focus on poverty alleviation tend to think that poverty is primarily about a lack of material things such as food, clothing, and shelter. As a result, they tend to focus their efforts on providing these material things to low-income people. In contrast to this common view of poverty, low-income people tend to describe their poverty in far more psychological and social terms, often expressing a profound sense of shame, inferiority, helplessness, vulnerability, and social isolation. This disconnect between how we think of poverty and how the poor actually experience poverty is at the heart of the crisis in poverty alleviation efforts. We need a sound diagnosis of the underlying disease of poverty if we are to apply the proper treatment.

From a biblical perspective, poverty is rooted in broken relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. In this light, material poverty is a symptom of something deeper. We need to stop

treating the symptoms and start treating the underlying causes of poverty; indeed, treating the symptoms, e.g., continually giving handouts of material resources, can actually make matters worse by undermining the materially poor’s dignity and stewardship. We need to see poverty alleviation as a process of reconciling both the materially poor and non-poor to right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. In other words, poverty alleviation is about participating in the reconciling mission of God expressed in Colossians 1. (See chapters 2 and 3 of *When Helping Hurts* for a recap of these ideas.)



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

Here’s the uncomfortable truth: *because poverty alleviation is a long-term process of reconciliation, not a momentary provision of material goods, a standalone, two-week STM trip cannot significantly and directly contribute to poverty alleviation. But the trip can make poverty worse!* Please go back and read that previous sentence again, for it is one of the central messages of this book.



The growing emphasis on STMs that engage in poverty alleviation is rooted in a flawed understanding of what poverty actually is and of what poverty alleviation actually entails. *It is not just a material problem that can be addressed through providing material resources on two-week trips.*

The cosmic scope of both the brokenness of the fall and the power of Christ's redemptive work has to frame the way we plan, speak about, and evaluate STM efforts in materially poor communities. There *is* a way to do STMs that supports the long-term work God is already doing in a community, that avoids hurting those we are trying to help, and that leads to transformative engagement. But first we have to evaluate the current balance sheet of STMs—including the commonly cited benefits of these trips.

### **BENEFIT PACKAGES**

When church members describe the perceived benefits and impact of STMs on participants, several themes quickly emerge: *STM participants give more to long-term missions. They are more involved in ministry in their communities. They are more thankful for what God has given them. They form long-term relationships with low-income people. They may even become life-long missionaries.* Incredible things do happen through STMs. Participating in an STM has changed many people's lives, and that is a beautiful thing that we should never dismiss.

Unfortunately, within the body of quantitative research dedicated to the impact of STMs on participants, many studies rely on self-reported data from team members soon after their return from the trip. Very few studies follow up with participants a year or more after the experience, and even fewer corroborate self-reported data by studying participants' actual behaviors. The very limited research available that does dig into longer-term behavioral change in participants suggests that lasting personal transformation as a result of STMs is relatively low in percentage terms.

For example, Kurt Ver Beek, professor of sociology at Calvin College with more than twenty years of experience in Honduras, has conducted research into the long-term impact of the STM trips on team

members, looking beyond their initial statements to their actual behaviors. Ver Beek's data indicate that there is not a significant increase in participants' long-term missions giving to either the receiving organization or their sending churches.<sup>8</sup> And as for all the relationships that develop during STMs, the reality is that only a small percentage of STM team members ever have any contact with their new "friends" after the trip ends. It is also hard to support the claim that STMs directly and independently increase the number of long-term missionaries, given that the number of long-term missionaries over the past fifteen years is fairly stable despite the explosion of STM trips.<sup>9,10</sup>

Sociologist LiErin Probasco adds to this discussion by surveying the long-term impact of participating in an STM as a teen. She found that participation in an international STM as a teen has no significant impact on either giving or volunteering behaviors in the adults studied. She also found that participants in domestic trips did not exhibit increased financial support for their local congregations. However, domestic participants were more likely to volunteer their time toward work in their own community and abroad.<sup>11</sup> Reflecting on this data, Probasco suggests that the "novelty, intensity, and 'shock'" of international trips could actually hinder participants from translating and applying their experiences to their own contexts, undermining their likelihood to engage over the long haul.<sup>12</sup> While there is more research to be done in this area, her initial observations should make us consider the way we think about and market the impact of STMs. Our focus on crafting extreme and stretching experiences to create change might actually be setting up barriers to lasting transformation and action in participants' lives.

Although there is a need for many more studies, the current research should give us pause about the extent to which STMs as often currently practiced are catalysts for widespread and lasting personal change. For some people, they are incredibly transformative, and we should always recognize and rejoice in that transformation. But given the scale of STMs in our churches, we must also consider how we can make such positive outcomes more frequent, and we certainly should

not claim that STM involvement automatically or consistently leads to transformation.

Similar claims of positive change are made about the impact of STMs on low-income communities: *STM teams build houses and provide clean water that wouldn't exist any other way. They lead people to salvation. They show children love that they would have never received otherwise.* Unfortunately, there is a lack of systematic research focused on the effect of STMs on receiving communities experiencing material poverty. However, some practitioners and researchers are questioning whether there is as much of a lasting positive impact as the teams believe. We tend to think that STMs are contributing to significant change because many of the stories we hear are self-reported by teams upon their return.<sup>13</sup> Thus, our assessment of STMs' impact is slanted toward recognizing only the benefits. After two weeks of playing with children, digging wells, and repairing houses, participants return full of stories and examples of how God used them in powerful ways. But these teams are not in the communities two weeks, two months, or two years later. Often the wells break down, the houses slide back into disrepair, and the orphans still do not have stable, long-term relationships in their lives.

Remember: poverty is not just a lack of material resources, and poverty alleviation involves walking with people over time, pointing them to the power of Christ to heal the brokenness in their four key relationships. That process takes time. We should not be surprised that our two-week spurts of building things, handing out clothing, or spending time with children do not have a significant impact in reducing poverty.

## **A DIFFERENT SORT OF TRIP**

As we consider how to engage in short-term trips well, we have to honestly assess our current efforts. A healthy, effective trip is merely one piece of a larger commitment to learning and engagement with what God is doing around the world and in our own communities. Most of this guide will appraise how to practically design and implement trips in ways that support the work of local believers, that promote long-

term engagement in missions and poverty alleviation, and that foster lasting change in our own lives.

But first we have to assess the costs of STMs. With potentially three million team members involved in STMs each year and billions of dollars dedicated to these visits, the stakes are too high *not* to ask the hard questions.

### TAKEAWAYS

- Consider reading the referenced resources if you wish to more deeply understand the debate concerning the helpfulness of STMs as often practiced.
- Review noted chapters of *When Helping Hurts* to solidify your understanding of poverty and how poverty alleviation fits into God's work.