A few months ago I received a phone call from a woman about to embark on a visit to her parish’s “sister parish” in Haiti. She wondered if I knew a source for inexpensive bulk vegetable seeds. She thought seeds purchased in the United States were superior to seeds purchased in Haiti. Significantly, she was consulting with me about this, a relative stranger whom she had met at a conference, rather than anyone from the host parish in Haiti.

This anecdote illustrates several of the problems commonly associated with short-term mission trips: the mission group determines the agenda; they often spend money on expensive items in the United States, Europe, or Canada that could be purchased for less in the host country; they are often “work” focused, rather than relationship focused; and the mission group has a kind of superiority complex, thinking that everything from their country is better. Other concerns with short-term mission, which have been voiced to me by receiving communities, are that the encounters are fleeting with little follow-up or action in the participants’ home country and that participants know little about the culture, language, or history of the host country.

For the purposes of this reflection, “short-term mission” refers to the visit of a group of Christians from one country, usually in the Global North, to a church in an impoverished country of the Global South. Recent surveys indicate that more than 1.5 million U.S. Christians travel abroad every year on short-term mission trips, most lasting 14 days or less (Priest and Priest, 54). Given the size of the short-term mission movement, it is worth investigating whether we can retrieve it as a viable and effective means of doing cross-cultural ministry. In this reflection, I sketch the elements of a quality short-term mission experience and then provide a list of “tools” for constructing it.

**What Makes a Good Short-Term Mission Program?**

A quality short-term mission program will contain these elements:

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• Participants are familiar with the host community's culture, context, history, and language.

• The goals of the experience are clear and include relationship-building, a genuine cross-cultural experience, and continuing the connection after the visitors return home.

• The experience is based in mutuality that respects the leadership of the host community, who defines their own needs and expectations.

• The program is designed to facilitate profound personal and spiritual transformation on the part of the visitors that translates into future action.

Tools for Achieving a Quality Short-Term Mission Program

Trip Preparation

Trip activities, goals, and schedule are determined in collaboration with the host community. Members of the host community co-lead the delegation during the visit.

Education and Formation

I find that a minimum of 8 sessions for formation is necessary: 6 prior to departure and 2 after returning. Each session includes prayer, time for community-building, and content that reviews the culture, history, and economic and political situation of the region, as well as the faith and spirituality that have led the group to participate in the mission. Discussions about the history of colonialism and racism help the group to understand the origin of differences between the Global North and South. At least some minimal language preparation should be attempted, and participants can be encouraged to study more on their own.

The group continues to meet while traveling and at least twice after the trip to reflect together on what the experience has meant for their lives, on maintaining the relationships they have developed, and on how to continue to support their host community in the future. I give groups a reading list to work on before, during, and after the trip, encourage them to keep a journal, and ask them to write a reflection about their experience after they return, for publication in their church bulletin or other newsletter.

Housing

Often host communities scratch their heads about why visiting church people stay in hotels instead of staying with local families. Staying with families encourages relationship development, facilitates a genuine cross-cultural experience, and gives an opportunity to host families to participate in the mission work by providing hospitality.

Work Projects

Short-term mission groups commonly travel in order to build something in the host community, like houses or church buildings. This is probably due to our North American attitude of “doing” rather than “being.” Part of the spiritual preparation for the trip can involve reflecting on the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42, where Jesus tells us that Mary, who spends her time listening to Jesus rather than cleaning up, has found the better way. Our relationship with Jesus, in the form of our relationships with the world’s most marginalized and impoverished, is more important than our work projects.

One does not travel to another country in order to do something that the people can do for themselves; the host community has the skills to build its own houses or church buildings. It only lacks the resources. The money spent sending a short-term mission group to do the work would be better spent supporting the locals in doing the work themselves.

I do think that work projects can be successful as a form of relationship-building.
On one of my trips to Haiti, we joined a group of high school students and a few adults for several days of painting their school. The local pastor suggested and led the project. Working together took us beyond the barriers of language and culture and bonded us in a way that nothing else had. At the end, we shared a meal and taught each other songs in our native languages. It is one of my fondest memories of travel to Haiti.

Suitcases Full of Donated Goods

In addition to Haitian Americans visiting their relatives, airplanes to Haiti are filled with church people embarking on short-term mission trips, often wearing matching t-shirts and hats. Upon arrival in the airport at Port-au-Prince, they can be seen unloading bag after bag filled with donations for their host community. I think this is an expression of generosity and a desire to not arrive empty-handed to the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

However, often these bags are filled with things people cannot use (like outdated medications), or things people are trying to get rid of (like old clothes), or things that could much more easily have been bought in Haiti (like seeds). Donations make sense if they are part of a relief project after a natural disaster (such as mosquito nets when they are in short supply after flooding), or if they help to sustain a long-term project (such as coffee bags for the coffee project), or if the host community specifically requests something that cannot be purchased locally.

Linkage with a Long-Term Project

Sponsors of short-term mission groups often suggest that the participants will get more out of the experience, in the form of personal growth, than the host communities. With this attitude we are using the economically poor for our own growth experiences and devaluing long-term relationship and commitment. Host communities hope and expect that participants in short-term mission groups will continue to be involved in the community over the long term. Without a long-term commitment, the money spent on travel expenses could be better spent on economic development or some other kind of social justice project in the host community.

Many groups, including sister-parish groups, consider long-term relationship to mean leaving a check at the end of the trip. I recently had a conversation with a pastor in Haiti who told me he wishes he could do a study of the impact of charitable assistance on Haiti for the last 50 years. In his view, the only thing it has accomplished is that Haiti has become poorer. In Colombia, host communities told me that they assume visitors will return home and advocate for changes to policies in the United States that negatively affect Colombia. I am currently involved in preparing short-term mission trips to Haiti, with the idea that the groups will become involved in marketing and selling the coffee produced by the community we visit. The coffee project offers the community real hope that someday they will be artisans of their own destiny, rather than permanently dependent on the goodwill of foreigners.

Leadership Training

Many pastors, pastoral associates, youth ministers, or leaders in faith-based organizations will find themselves in a position of leading a short-term mission trip at least once. However, most of these people have never had any training. Given the size of the short-term mission movement, and the problems referenced here, schools of ministry need to be offering courses that train pastoral ministers in the art of leading short-term mission trips. This training should include an actual short-term trip that connects to a
long-term project supported by the school. Leadership is important, because usually it is the trip leader who will model relationship-building and long-term commitment and who will bring a spirit of mutuality, collaboration, and empowerment of the host community.

Reference